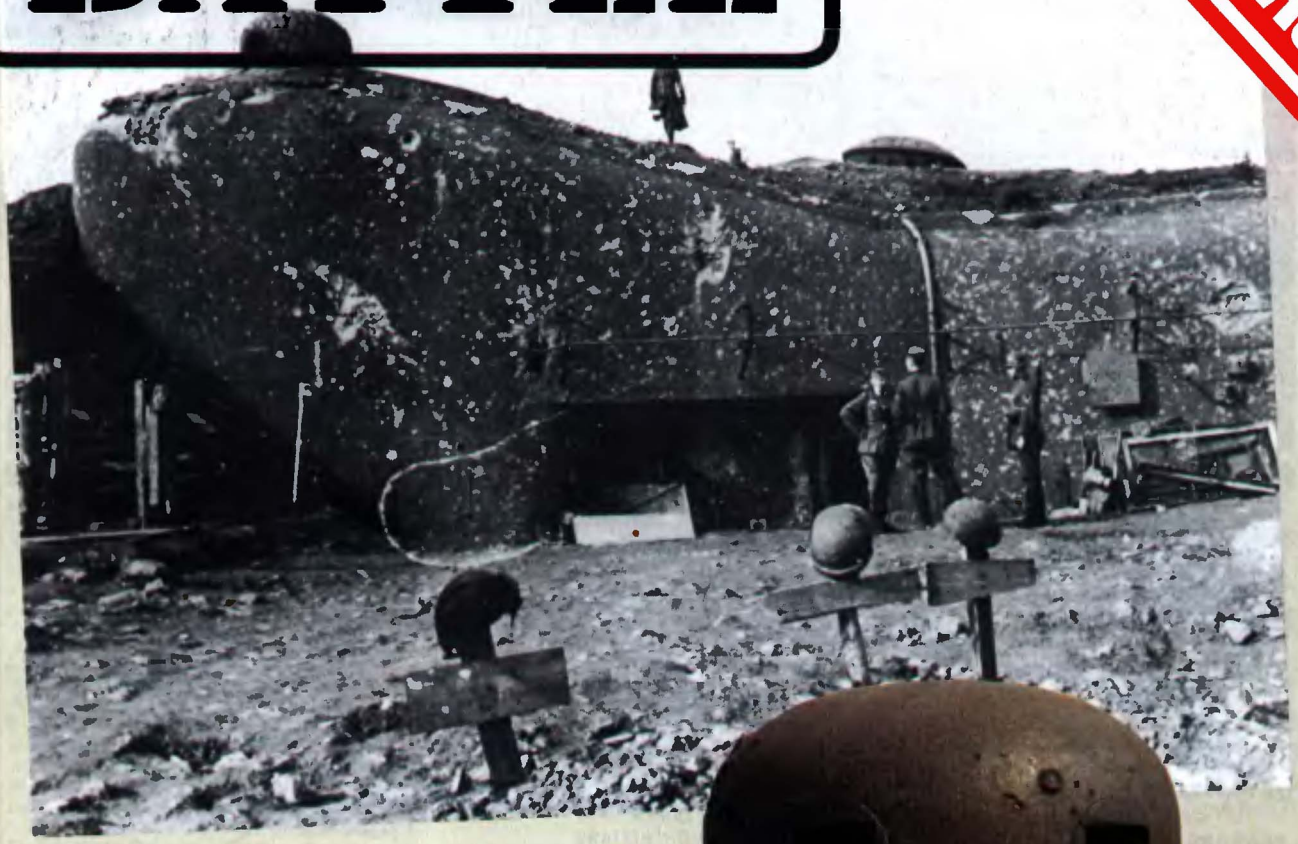
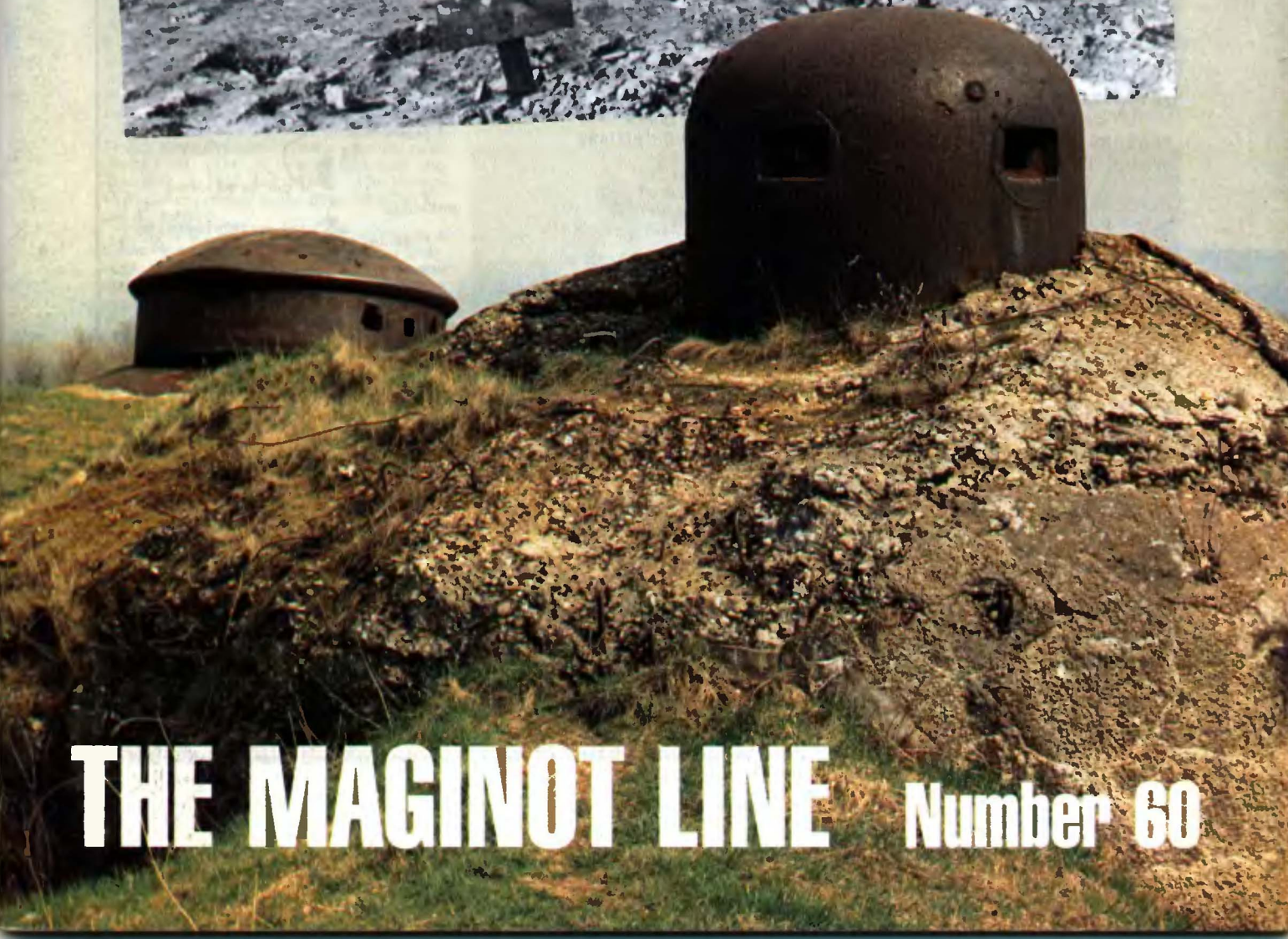
AFTER THE BATTLE

50 YEARS AGO





THE MAGINOT LINE

Number 60

THE MAGINOT LINE

BY JEAN PAUL PALLUD

From Brussels to Paris, wrote Clausewitz, lay 'the pit of the French stomach'. General Alfred von Schlieffen, Chief-of-Staff of the German General Staff at the turn of the century, had drawn up a detailed plan to once more put this maxim to the test and in 1914 the German offensive had proved the truth of it, nearly bringing France to defeat.

Perturbed by the obvious frailty of France's north-eastern frontier after the near disaster of 1914 — which followed the invasions of 1815 and 1870 — the French Government turned to the question of securing its defence.

To consider how this could be achieved, a Commission for the Defence of the Territory (Commission de Défense du Territoire) was appointed in 1922. This was mainly composed of men who had won the First World War, among them were national heroes like Maréchals Ferdinand Foch, Joseph Joffre and Philippe Pétain. The three leaders did not see eye to eye. The theory of a 'continuous front' — planned battlefield defences, derived from the experience of trench warfare — advanced by Pétain ran contrary to the thinking of Foch, who distrusted any static defences and to those who thought, as Joffre did, in terms of the infantry's contribution to victory and of a series of fortified areas enabling the infantry to manoeuvre to attack. Joffre eventually resigned from the commission and over the years Pétain's views were to carry a good deal of weight.

In December 1925, only a month after he had been made Minister of War, M. Paul Painlevé appointed a Frontier Defence Commission (Commission de Défense des Frontières) to succeed the previous one. Its task was to decide on the basic principles and establish the nature and layout of the future line. The commission took into account the protection of the whole length of the front, including the Alps. After considering where the evident weaknesses lay, the commission decided that there were three dangerous sectors that had to be fortified: the Metz area, the Lauter area and the Belfort area. The rest of the north-eastern frontier was regarded as difficult for an invader and was to be made impassable by demolitions and covered by the infantry.

It was made abundantly clear that, should the Germans ever seek to invade France, the fortifications were intended to force them into a costly frontal attack and, should they attempt to outflank them, then France would

Top: **Depicted in 1969, the 75mm turret of Block 8 at Simserhof — a somewhat stronger part of the Maginot Line, having been amongst the first fortresses to be built, in 1929 — later ones were not so well constructed.** *Above:* **A presumably posed shot of some 'interval' troops in the wire at Velosnes, a major fortress in the Montmédy sector. (ECP Armées)**

come to the aid of either Belgium or Switzerland, whichever territory the Germans crossed. The fortifications also enabled savings in manpower, which would help the French Army to overcome the shortage of men following a sharp drop in the birthrate caused by the sons not born to the millions of men killed in the First World War, and to assemble large forces for attack or counter-attack.

Having succeeded in imposing his views, Maréchal Pétain inspected the frontier during the summer of 1927 and this resulted in some changes to the plans. In September, an Organising Commission for Fortified Regions (Commission d'Organisation des Régions Fortifiées, or CORF) was appointed to deal with the practical details from the planning stage onwards. Work began on two small-scale experimental sites at Rimplas in February 1928, the Higher War Council adopting a five-year programme at an estimated cost of 3,760 million francs. To render it more financially attractive, this figure was reduced further and further before the project was put before Parliament, the major victim being the Belfort area, which was scaled down from an intended strongly fortified line to a row of casemates. The proposals cost 'only' 2,900 million francs when they were passed, by a large majority, by Parliament and Senate in late 1929. The project had been presented by the recently appointed new Minister of War, M. André

Most of the fortresses were constructed to defend France's north-eastern border but the Alpine Front was also protected — this is Block 5 of Le Lavoir Fortress built 2000 metres up in the French Alps at Savoie. (ECP Armées)

France was proud of her Maginot Line and Allied delegations often visited the fortresses. A group of British officers was pictured at the munitions entrance of Hackenberg in 1939 — a present-day visit to the fortress still begins here. (ECP Armées)

Maginot, and in time became known by his name — though as 'Father of the Line', despite his being a resolute supporter of the fortifications, paternity belongs to his predecessor, M. Painlevé. By the time that the plans were at last finalised, becoming statute on January 14, 1930, a start had already been made in December 1929 on four fortresses that were considered to be essential: at Rochonvillers, Hackenberg, Simserhof and Hochwald. Somewhat symbolical of how the fortifications had to be scaled down in the succeeding years because of budget problems in a world striken by grave economic difficulties, these four initial fortresses would turn out to be the strongest and most developed of the whole line.

Work proceeded if not always with the same degree of priority, the construction of casemates along the Rhine starting only in 1931 and measures in the Alps being introduced at a somewhat slower pace. At the completion of the first phase in 1933, the 'old fronts' (anciens fronts) were defended by twenty major and twenty-seven minor fortresses plus hundreds of casemates and shelters.

In 1934, the new Minister of War, M. Edouard Daladier, and the new Chief of the General Staff, Général Maurice Gamelin, each carried out an inspection of the fortifications and arrived at the same conclusion: that it was hardly sensible to build a wall if it was possible to pass on both sides of it. An extension of the Line was embarked upon, although the protection of these 'new fronts' (nouveaux fronts) posed an impossible set of requirements — that of making the defences sufficiently strong both in a short time and within a limited budget.

A strong fortified position was planned near Maubeuge, five major fortresses being planned between Valenciennes and Trélon, but the ambitious project was watered down to just five minor fortresses and the elaborate line of casemates was also considerably reduced. Along the border with the Belgian province of Luxembourg, four fortresses and twelve casemates were built in the Montmédy area, but the two fortresses classified as major were not that strong and the sector was made still weaker by the existence of the Marville gap and the fact that the major fortress that was due to anchor its left at Vaux-les-Mouzons was not built.

Further to the east, the Lauter front was prolonged westwards by the construction of two minor fortresses, the Haut-Poirier and the Welschoff; with no artillery block, these two fortresses were far too weak considering their advanced position on the eastern flank of the Sarre gap.

At the end of 1935 the rôle of the Organising Commission had come to an end, except for the Alps where it was still dealing with work to be completed. Construction continued under the Army regional commands. This third phase, from 1936, when intentions were dissipated by restricted funds and time was short, is often known as the 'plugging' phase. Hastily contrived on a local basis and not to any overall plan, these late efforts were to make no real contribution towards reinforcing the Maginot Line. As testified by Général Julien Dufieux at the Riom trial which ensued after the French defeat of 1940, 'they were built at the lowest cost and quality was sacrified for quantity'. Although some of the casemates designed by the Army's Technical Engineering Services (Services Techniques du Génie, or STG) had some value, most of the other bunkers built at this time were of relatively little account and had nothing to do with the substantial undertakings of the Organising Commission.

These undertakings, along the north-eastern frontier alone — excluding the Alps — amounted to 22 major fortresses, 36 minor fortresses, 311 casemates, 78 shelters and 14 observation posts.

A FAILURE?

Surprising as it may seem, considering the shattering defeat of France in the summer of 1940, the Maginot Line actually worked. It did what it was intended to do, in forcing the Germans to outflank it and attack through Belgium. Not that the same could be said, of course, of the decision of the French High Command to advance northwards into Belgium (even into the Netherlands), far beyond the 'continuous front' they had spent so much on building, to hold the Germans there. Although the 'continuous front' was not continuous and the Maginot Line was far from impenetrable, there is no doubt that the Line was not made the best use of. Outmanoeuvred by the German strategy of striking through the Ardennes, after the disastrous course of events that befell the French armies in the north when the panzers broke through at Sedan and thrust for the Channel coast, the writing was on the wall. The depleted French forces that were hastily redistributed with their right anchored on the Maginot Line stood little chance of stemming the German tide when it flowed southwards. After that, the Maginot Line had no effective rôle to play in staving off defeat as the Germans pushed deeper into France; and the massed counter-attacks from the Line, which its proponents had envisaged as integral to the concept, were never to be mounted.

One of the largest 'battle blocks' on the Maginot Line was Block 5 at Rochonvillers with three 75mm and one 135mm embrasure. (ECP Armées)

Like silent sentinels, the barbed wire and tank obstacles dominate the landscape at Hackenberg in 1939. (ECP Armées)

Left: **Although the heavy artillery and interval troops withdrew as ordered, the fortresses attackers still had a fight on their hands. On the 1. Armee front, in the Saar, these seven German graves in front of a casemate at Francaltroff, 18 km south-east of Saint-Avold, testify to the fact.** *Right:* **Today, the STG casemate (with a GFM cupola and two embrasures) remains relatively unchanged; the seven Germans have since been transferred to the Niederbronn German military cemetery.**

When the Line was forced in June, by the German 1. Armee in the Sarre and by the 7. Armee on the Rhine, it was hardly a true indication of its capabilities; at this point, the French Army was defeated and in retreat, most of the interval troops had been withdrawn, likewise the heavy supporting artillery, and the fortresses and casemates fought alone. In spite of this, the defenders held their ground: most of the fortresses remained unvanquished until the end and the men in the casemates often fought back hard and with success — in the Putelange and Hoffen sectors for example, the German units attacking the advance posts suffered heavy casualties. It should be noted however that the Germans did not amass large forces to take the line of fortresses, choosing to await the armistice and for them to be handed over, with a minimum of casualties.

On June 25, when all was lost for France, most of the Maginot Line proper was still fighting. Apart from two major fortresses which were ordered to be sabotaged and abandoned on June 12, none of these had been lost; of the minor fortresses, twenty-five were still in action, the six on the left wing having been lost in May (the five in the Escaut and Maubeuge sectors plus La Ferté), one had been ordered to be abandoned on June 13 (Thonnelle) and four had been taken after June 20 (Kerfent, Bambesch, Haut-Poirier and Welschoff).

FORTIFICATIONS

From the sea to the Rhine on the Swiss border, the defence of the north-eastern frontier was organised into fifteen Fortified Sectors (Secteurs Fortifiés) and four Defensive Sectors (Secteurs Défensifs). Each sector had under command all the troops manning the defences in the area and this amounted, in peacetime, to one regiment of fortress troops (Régiment d'Infanterie de Forteress, or RIF). In wartime, each regiment was to be reinforced to form three regiments, the sector being then divided into three sub-sectors (sous-secteurs) each manned by one of the regiments.

Though varying in strength, the Rhine defences and the 'new fronts' being on a lesser scale, the Line was organised in depth. First came the occasional small strongpoints built on the border itself, permanently manned by troops whose primary rôle was to sound the alarm. The main defences began about two or three kilometres from the border with a series of advanced posts — garrisoned casemates with defensive armament. The main line of resistance, the fortress line, ran about ten kilometres from the border, accentuated by an anti-tank barrier of rails embedded in concrete in the ground. Just behind were shelters for the infantry.

A second line of resistance, of casemates and bunkers about fifteen kilometres from the border, came into being mainly during the third phase of building and was weak and badly organised. Interval artillery units — heavy batteries which the fortresses lacked, mobile or rail mounted — were on this line.

To the rear were the support and supply facilities: barracks for the bulk of the infantry . . . ammunition and food dumps . . . narrow-gauge railway lines feeding the major fortresses . . . the broad-gauge lines of the railway guns . . . underground communication networks . . . buried power lines linking each of the fortresses to a sheltered powerhouse, one for each sector, fed from the main grid . . . etc.

CASEMATES

These concrete structures providing sheltered firing positions for infantry weapons were of various types according to the date of their construction.

The basic design of the initial casemate designed by the Organising Commission in 1930 — known as the CORF casemate — was fairly similar to the infantry block of a fortress; being independent, it had however to be self-sufficient and possessed its own generator, a ventilation system in case of gas attack, a water well, food and supplies. . . The forward-facing wall and the roof were about 3.5 metres thick; the others only half that. The CORF casemate usually had two levels, the upper one being the 'fighting deck', the lower housing the generators, supplies, and providing accomodation for the crew of about thirty men. They were sited every 1,200 metres or so, often as couples covering each other and which were sometimes linked by an underground gallery. There were either single or double, with one or two firing chambers, and usually armed with anti-tank guns (25mm, 37mm or 47mm), Reibel machine guns and light machine guns firing from embrasures and with GFM, JM and AM cupolas (see below). A few had variations of their own: five of the late casemates built in the Maubeuge area were armed with an AM turret with a 50mm mortar, a casemate near Havange was armed with a 50mm mortar firing from an embrasure, and one in northern Alsace with two 81mm mortars firing from embrasures.

Of the casemates that were built later, the well-designed and valuable Technical Engineering Services version — known as the STG casemate — consisted of two firing chambers and a cupola, with no second level. The others — those that were built in haste and often without any regard to a co-ordinated fire plan — were mostly of a single firing chamber type. Depending on which sector they were built in, they bore the name of the army group or army commander — Block Garchery, Block Billotte, Block Barbeyrac, for example. Some artillery casemates were built on the 'new fronts'; although armed with one or two 75mm howitzers, these were far less sophisticated than the artillery blocks built on the 'old fronts'.

Another STG casemate, MM 421, pictured in a peaceful 1986 setting beside the N43 near Petit-Xivry, about six kilometres west of Longuyon. The embrasures face the Chiers river, a few hundred metres away across a gently sloping meadow.

For all their ventilation equipment, the fortresses were stuffy places to be in, as is well illustrated here. *Above:* **To avoid polluting the air with diesel fumes, electric locomotives were used to pull the supply trains along the tunnels. Ammunition is unloaded from a larger, external loco at Hackenberg's entrance in 1939. Note the apprehensive soldier on the right feeding power to the unit manually, the overhead lines being omitted to allow both locomotives to unload side by side.** *Below:* **At Velosnes, the troglodytes emerge for a breather! (ECP Armées)**

SHELTERS

These were built to shelter the infantry operating between the fortresses and to provide an adequately equipped command post for their officers. Essentially passive, they were not taken into account in the fire plan and were only provided for their defence with one or two GFM cupolas and some embrasures for light machine guns. Rare exceptions had a JM cupola or an embrasure for a 37mm AT/Reibel JM.

FORTRESSES

There were five grades of fortress classified according to their armament and the size of their garrison but this was often simplified into two categories: the infantry fortress, known as the minor fortress (Petit Ouvrage) and the artillery fortress, known as the major fortress (Gros Ouvrage). Both had the same basic layout, with their battle blocks forward and entrance blocks some distance behind the firing line. Linked by galleries, the command post, power-house, sleeping quarters, storage areas, etc, were all sited far below the surface. Often however, because of the need to cut costs, plans had to be modified and a good many fortresses differed in their actual specifications. This applied particularly to the minor fortresses, which were sometimes built minus the entrance block to the rear or with fewer galleries so that not all their blocks were linked as planned. All the fortresses on the 'old fronts' with the exception of those in the Lauter area were numbered: eastwards from A1, Ferme de Chappy, to A38, Teting.

A minor fortress had two or three battle blocks, each mounting one MI turret (see below), and one or two flanking blocks. The crew of a minor fortress of the north-eastern front — 'crew' because their existence was so much like that aboard a warship — numbered between 65 and 250 men and averaged 125. The minor fortresses had no artillery and the experience of June 1940 was to show that they were in fact unable to defend themselves when on their own: after the withdrawal of the interval troops, the Germans were able to approach them from the rear to fire on them without opposition. This could only be prevented, and the attackers stand a chance of being repelled, if a minor fortress was within range of the artillery of a major fortress (or of the 81mm mortars of a minor fortress as demonstrated by Laudrefang, which effectively covered its neighbours).

A major fortress had the same disposition of infantry blocks in front to ensure the defence of the fort but these were supplemented somewhat to the rear by one or several artillery blocks mounting 75mm howitzers, 135mm heavy mortars and 81mm mortars. Still farther to the rear, sometimes as far as two kilometres away, were the two entrance blocks to the fortress, one for personnel, one for munitions and supplies. According to the nature of the terrain, these entrances were either on a level with the main underground thoroughfare, connecting directly with it, or they were shafts sunk to this thoroughfare from above, with a lift at the munitions and supplies entrance and stairwell at the personnel entrance. The

battle blocks being far from the entrances, the main thoroughfare of a major fortress was usually equipped with a narrow-gauge electric railway to bring up the ammunition to them. On the north-eastern front, a major fortress was garrisoned by between 450 and 1,000 men; on average about 500, of whom more than a third were gunners, and the others infantry and engineers in about equal numbers.

ARMAMENTS

These brief details are intended to provide an indication of the Line's basic armament.

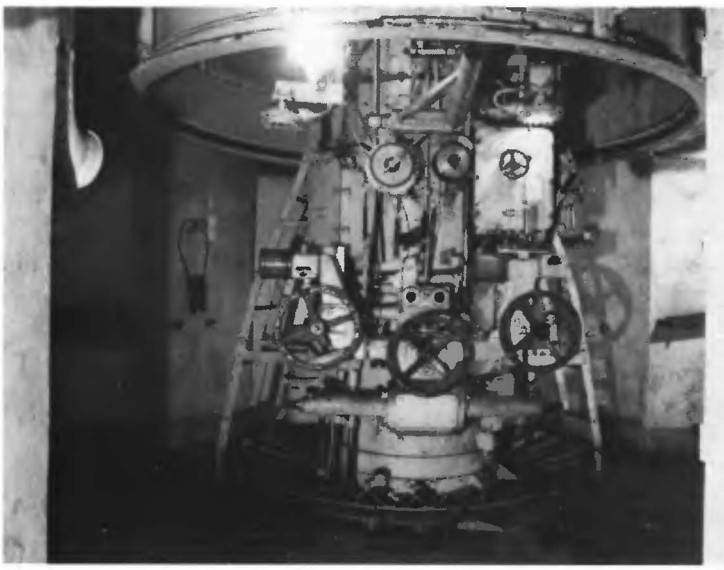
Weapons in retractable, rotating turrets:

75mm turret. Two 75mm howitzers mounted in a turret 3.30 or 4.20 metres in diameter according to mark, the 3.30-metre turret weighing 265 tonnes. There were 34 such turrets in the whole of the Maginot Line; of these 29 were on the north-eastern front.

135mm turret. Two 135mm heavy mortars mounted in a turret 2.10 metres in diameter and weighing 165 tonnes. There were seventeen such turrets in the whole of the Maginot Line and of these sixteen were on the north-eastern front.

Magic Mushrooms! *Top:* **75mm Model 32 turret on Block 7 at the formidable Schiesseck fortress.** *Above:* **Block 1's AM turret at the smaller Rohrbach fort.** *Below:* **135mm turret on Block 9 at the major Hackenberg complex. (ECP Armées)**

Above: **Block 5's 81mm turret (seen here retracted) at Fermont in 1987. Note the GFM cupola nestling snugly in its concrete mount in the background.** *Below:* **The claustrophobic interior of another 81mm turret showing the space taken up by the equipment, this time on Block 3 of the Immerhof fortress, taken in 1986.**



81mm turret. Two 81mm mortars mounted in a turret 1.55 metres in diameter and weighing 125 tonnes. There were twenty-one such turrets in the whole of the Maginot Line, all in the north-east.

AM turret (Arme Mixte: mixed armament). Diameter about 2.60 metres; weight about 150 tonnes. The 'mixed armament' consisted of a 25mm anti-tank gun and a set of twinned machine guns (Reibel JM mounting). The 25mm AT gun had a rate of fire of fifteen rounds per minute; muzzle velocity 918 m/s. Being of a later design, there were only twelve of these AM turrets in the whole of the Maginot Line, all on the 'new fronts'.

AM turret with 50mm mortar. Fitted with a 25mm anti-tank gun, a Reibel JM and a 50mm mortar. Another late-design turret, of which there were only seven in the north-east, and five in casemates in the Maubeuge sector.

MI turret (Mitrailleuses: machine guns). For twinned Reibel-mounted 7.5mm machine guns, it was 1.20 metres in diameter and weighed about 96 tonnes. There were 61 such turrets in the Maginot line, all in the north-east.

Types of turret used in the more substantial fortresses included the Mi type (*left*) on Block 4 at Simserhof and, *right*, an AM type mounting a 50mm mortar, on Block 9 at Anzeling in the Boulay sector. (ECP Armées)

A brace of armoured cupolas astride the crest of Block 3 at Fermont, 1987. On the left is the JM type and, right, the GFM.

Weapons operated from fixed armoured cupolas:

GFM cupola (Guet et Fusil Mitrailleur: watch and light machine gun). For observation and from which 7.5mm FM Mdle 24/29 light machine guns could be fired. Also later developed for the 50mm mortar. A periscope could be raised through an aperture on the top. There were usually three slits around the side, though some had up to five. Nearly 450 of these cupolas surmounted the fortresses on the north-eastern front, and there were hundreds on the casemates.

LG cupola (Lance Grenades: grenade launcher). Designed to receive a 60mm mortar, this cupola was very low, projecting only 26 centimetres as opposed to between 1 and 1.25 metres for the other type. The 60mm mortar was not produced and its 50mm mortar replacement had not in fact been installed by the outbreak of war. There were fifty-one such cupolas on the fortresses of the north-eastern front, plus several of them on the casemates.

JM cupola (Jumellage Mitrailleuses: twinned machine guns). Designed to receive Reibel JM twinned machine guns, this type had a large firing slit and two smaller observation slits on one side.

AM cupola (Arme Mixte: mixed armament). A late design, appearing only in 1934, for a 25mm anti-tank gun and Reibel JM

Like a gargantuan set of motorway 'cat's eyes' this AM cupola type B squats in the grass above Block 2 at Rohrbach fortress. (ECP Armées)

Left: **An episcopic observation cupola pictured in 1987 on Block 6 at Simserhof; this one has five side apertures plus the one on top for the periscope.** *Right:* **A periscopic observation cupola pictured on Block 12 at Hackenberg; this type of cupola differs somewhat from its taller companions in that it had a far lower profile, offering only a minute target.**

Left: **A GFM cupola on the crest of Block 2 at La Ferté in 1987 — Roger Conraux, Paul Gomez and Joseph Koesters were killed inside, when German artillery scored a direct hit on the cupola early on May 18, 1940.** *Right:* **The interior of a similar cupola on Block 9 at Schiesseck. A 7.5mm FM 24/29 light machine gun and an episcope are mounted in the embrasures. (ECP Armées)**

twinned machine guns. There were about thirty such cupolas installed in the fortresses on the north-eastern front, plus several on the casemates.

Observation cupolas, or Observatories, were for observation only and not for firing from. These were of two basic types: one with three side apertures as well as an aperture on top for a periscope; the other, having a far lower profile rising no more than a few centimetres above the ground, with a periscope only.

German 88mm flak guns firing from only a couple of hundred metres away wreaked some awesome havoc with this GFM cupola on Block 2 of the minor Kerfent fortress, producing this spectacular result. This same cupola can be seen before the battle in the centre photo on page 30 and afterwards on page 31 bottom.

Weapons firing from embrasures:

75mm howitzer. With a range of about 9 to 12 kilometres according to mark, this had an impressive rate of fire of nearly thirty rounds per minute. There were 44 such howitzers in the fortresses on the north-eastern front.

135mm heavy mortar. This lobbed an 18-kilo shell up to 5.7 kilometres, having a rate of fire of up to eight rounds per minute. There were seven such heavy mortars in the fortresses on the north-eastern front.

81mm mortar. This lobbed a 3-kilo shell up to 3.2 kilometres; the rate of fire was about ten rounds per minute. There were sixteen such mortars in the fortresses on the north-eastern front, plus two in a casemate near Hoffen.

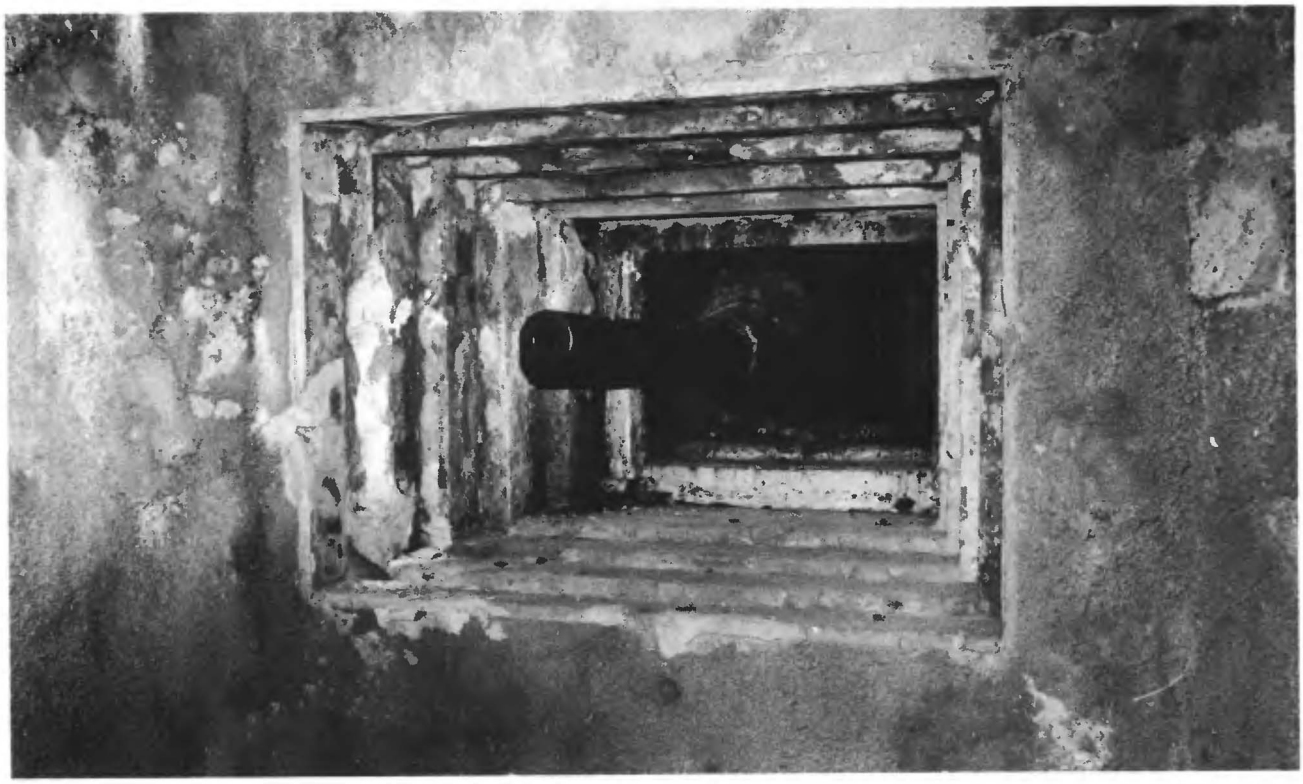
47mm (or 37mm) anti-tank gun. Rate of fire twenty rounds per minute, muzzle velocity about 900 m/s. Originally the threat of armour had not been taken into account. For anti-tank guns to be installed, an ingenious rail-mounting system was devised and mounted behind a Reibel JM embrasure so that either the anti-tank gun or the twinned machine guns could be fired from the same embrasure — this arrangement being referred to here as a 47mm AT/Reibel JM embrasure. There were nearly 150 such embrasures in the fortresses on the north-eastern front, most of them for 47mm guns. plus several hundred in the casemates.

7.5mm machine guns. Two twinned MAC 31 machine guns on a mounting referred to here as Reibel JM. Rate of fire per set about 750 rounds per minute; effective range 1,200 metres. There were about a hundred such embrasures in the fortresses on the north-eastern front, plus several hundred in the casemates.

7.5mm FM 24/29 light machine gun. There were several hundred such embrasures in the fortresses and casemates.

50mm mortar. This close-range weapon lobbed a one-kilo shell up to about 320 metres. Although designed to be fired from a GFM cupola, some of them were mounted and fired from the embrasure designed for a light machine gun.

Dwarfed by its concrete home, this 135mm mortar peeps out of its embrasure in Block 4 at Simserhof in May 1987. Seven of these monsters were mounted in the fortresses on the north-east front. When in use, this weapon needed 250 litres of water per day to keep it cool.



AC 47 Modèle 1934 (47mm anti-tank gun) still in position at the munitions entrance to the Simserhof fortress. In such an embrasure, the gun could be elevated between +10° and −15° and laterally across 45°.

Just another day for these lads from 153ème RAP during a training exercise on one of the three 75mm Modèle 1929 howitzers of Block 5 at Hackenberg. The evening's entertainment will be at the fort's cinema . . .

MAGINOT AT WAR

During the phoney war the Hochwald fortress had the honour of firing the first shots in anger when the 75mm turret of Hochwald-Est fired in support of an infantry attack in the Schweigen sector during the night of September 8, 1939. When the Germans struck through the Low Countries in the summer of 1940, May saw the loss of six minor fortresses in the Escaut, Maubeuge and Montmédy sectors, otherwise the first weeks of the war were quiet for most of the fortresses. A threat appeared at the beginning of June when a powerful new German offensive, Plan 'Rot', broke through the front which had been temporarily stabilised along the Somme and Aisne rivers. On June 12, it was clear that the front was completely disrupted, and in a vain hope of holding the Germans somewhere back in the heart of France, Général Weygand ordered the French Army to withdraw. On the right flank of the French Army, units of the Groupe d'Armées No. 2 were to move out of their positions on the Maginot Line and withdrew southwards.

The army group had already started to pull back its left wing, endangered on June 11 by the 2eme Armée being forced to give ground, and the fortresses and casemates of the Montmédy sector were abandoned during the night of June 12. On June 13 the German vanguards were south of Chalons and now threatened the army group's entire flank. The arrangements for the withdrawal of its two armies on the left flank, the 3ème and 5ème Armées, included the interval troops and part of the fortress crews (up to forty per cent in the Thionville sector) being taken back during the night of June 15, the fortress and their reduced crews maintaining the illusion of a strong defence; two days later most of the fortress crews were to depart, leaving only a few men behind to cover their withdrawal; the last of the rearguard were to pull out if they could the following day, June 18, after wrecking everything within.

The first stage of the withdrawal went as planned during the night of June 15 but next

. . . meanwhile there are further flurries of activity on the telephone switchboard (*left*) whilst the firing is orchestrated from the fortress artillery command post, conducted by Commandant Henri Ebrard, standing at right. (ECP Armées)

day the situation of Groupe d'Armées No. 2 had become critical: while the 1. Armee was attacking in force in the Sarre sector, Gruppe Guderian had reached Besançon from the west and the 7. Armee was across the Rhine to the east. With German troops advancing on the rear of the Line, the latter stages of the withdrawal became impossible. On June 17 the 3ème Armée commander, Général Charles-Marie Condé, issued Order No. 4200/3: withdrawal was over; the fortresses would resist.

The Germans pressed on against the fortresses and shelled them heavily but they did not commit large forces against them and managed to force only four, all minor, to surrender before the armistice. France having capitulated in the early hours of June 25, sector commanders along various parts of the Line neither trusted what they heard on the French radio nor the Germans facing them; communication with the High Command had all but broken down. Against this background of uncertainity, the Commander-in-Chief North-East, Général Alphonse Georges, sent three officers north from Montauban, where his headquarters had withdrawn, to negotiate the handing over of the untaken fortifications. The terms of the armistice excluded French soldiers who had not laid down their arms before the ceasefire had come into effect. The envoys were to negotiate a handing over of the fortifications in exchange for the freedom of their garrisons, who technically were not prisoners-of-war.

The three envoys, Colonel Pierre Marion, Lieutenant-Colonel Jacques Simon and Lieutenant-Colonel Edouard Durieu du Souzy, left Montauban on June 27 and made contact with vanguards of the 4. Panzer-Division near Vienne in the Rhône valley. Driving northwards, they reached the command post of the XIV. Armeekorps near Macon in the evening and arrived at the headquarters of the 1. Armee at Lunéville just after midnight. The following morning they met the army chief-of-staff, Generalmajor Carl Hilpert, and soon realised that their mission would be difficult, if not impossible. It became apparent that the Germans had decided upon a straightforward surrender of the fortresses and their occupants. The 1. Armee staff were not willing to argue the point with the French representatives and sent them to Wiesbaden, where French and Germans delegations were to discuss all the details for the armistice. There they met Général Charles Huntziger, the leader of the French delegation, and explained the problem to him. Neither the three officers nor Général Huntzinger actually knew how many of the fortresses were still in French hands, but they had no idea that the Germans had in fact taken so few of them. Consequently, and also because Huntziger had so much else on his plate, much of it obviously of top-level importance, he did not press the issue as strongly as he might have done with the leader of the German delegation, General Carl Heinrich von Stülpnagel. The only concession the German armistice commission made was in allowing the officers of the forces to be taken into captivity to keep their swords. Concerned at the prospect of the Wehrmacht resuming its drive southwards if the French Government 'was not fullfilling all its obligations', Huntziger accepted on June 29 and despatched the three envoys with orders for the fortresses to surrender unconditionally. The officers left the following day for Sarrebrücken, where they separated, Colonel Marion travelling westwards to meet the four sector commanders of the Metz area, while Lieutenant-Colonels Simon and Durieu du Souzy headed eastwards. At Ingwiller the two of them met the commander of Höheres Kommando z.b.V. XXXVII, Generalleutnant Alfred Boehm-Tettelbach, and were then taken to meet the fortress commanders, Simon to the Rohrbach sector, Durieu du Souzy to the Haguenau sector. Like Marion, they were amazed at how many fortresses remained uncaptured and how many men would be committed to captivity. Too late. There was nothing to be done other than carry out their instructions which ordered the fortress commanders to surrender.

A demonstration for the press by Gefreiter Giloj of Infantrie-Regiment 125 of how he threw hand grenades through the embrasure of the casemate defended by Aspirant Jacques Miller and his section from 174ème RIF on June 14. In spite of the Herr Gefreiter's efforts the French beat off the probing attacks on the Saar front that day, before most of the troops were withdrawn the following night. We found the badly damaged casemate near the Hostebach river by the Kalmerich road, about one kilometre west of Puttelange. (M. Heiden via R. Bruge)

The final iniquity — having met Generalleutnant Alfred Boehm-Tettelbach at Ingwiller, the French High Command's envoy Lieutenant-Colonel Jacques Simon was taken to the Grand-Hohékirkel fortress in order to pass on the surrender instructions to the commander of the Rohrbach sector, Lieutenant-Colonel Raoul Bonlarron, and the CO of the Vosges sector, Commandant Pierre Fabre, on June 30 at the barracks. *Left:* Lieutenant-Colonel Bonlarron scowls disdainfully at the camera as Simon (XX) explains a finer point of the surrender to his new rulers. *Right:* An outraged Commandant Fabre listens incredulously to the terms of the Line's surrender drawn up contrary to the Armistice. He was so angry about it and protested so vehemently at the notion of surrendering his unvanquished forts that the Germans had him discreetly watched, just in case he was tempted to disobey his instructions. Generalleutnant Max von Viebahn can be seen prominent in both pictures, on the left (marked X) looking on with interest at the somewhat heated exchanges. (M. Cynrim via R. Bruge)

LA FERTÉ

One of the two minor fortresses of the Montmédy Fortified Sector, the fortress stands by the D52 on a ridge controlling the Chiers valley between Villy and La Ferté, about twenty-five kilometres south-east of Sedan.

Being at the rear of a neutral state, the Montmédy sector was not part of the original Maginot Line and was only weakly fortified during the second construction phase. The sector was responsible for the frontier from Pont-à-Bar, seven kilometres west of Sedan, to Velosnes, about six kilometres east of Montmédy. The fortifications consisted of two major fortresses, two minor fortresses and twelve casemates, stretching from La Ferté, to the west, to Velosnes, a major fortress, to the east. This relative weakness was even more noticeable on both the sector's flanks as the Ardennes and the Marville Defensive Sectors were only fortified with casemates.

La Ferté had two battle blocks:

Block 1: one 47mm AT/Reibel JM embrasure, one Reibel JM embrasure, two GFM cupolas and two AM cupolas.

Block 2: one AM turret, one GFM cupola, one AM cupola and one observation cupola.

Near the fortress were also two casemates which controlled the road on both sides of the ridge, Casemate Ouest facing Villy and Casemate Est facing La Ferté.

The fortress was manned by 3 officers and 101 men of the fourth company of the 155ème RIF under Lieutenant Maurice Bourguignon, and the two casemates by men of the 169ème RAP.

The westernmost fortress of the sector, La Ferté was poorly designed: the gallery which linked its two blocks provided neither long-term accomodation nor an escape route; its two blocks were unable to support each other as well as they ought, this being still more true of the two casemates, and there were large areas of dead ground, particularly near Block 2 and the Casemate Est. To make things worse, the fortress and the two casemates were not under the same command.

In May 1940 the left wing of the Montmédy sector was under the tactical command of the XVIIIème Corps d'Armée of the 2ème Armée. On May 14, after the German breakthrough at Sedan, the 3ème DINA holding the Chiers river withdrew; following up, the 71. Infanterie-Division was soon in contact with the left of the fortified line. The fortress and casemates overlooking the Chiers valley prevented the widening of the VII. Armeekorps base and threatened its flank, and so would have to be dealt with. While Arko 7 was bringing its artillery batteries forward, on May 15 the infantry of 71. Infanterie-Division pressed on. The following day the pressure mounted, particularly on the village of Villy which was resolutely defended by men of the 23eme RIC. On May 17 the crews of the two casemates were ordered to withdraw and on the 18th the last elements of the 23ème RIC at Villy were overwhelmed.

Arko 7 having brought forward most of its batteries, shelling of the La Ferté fortress — Panzerwerke 505 to the Germans — now intensified, with 88mm Flak firing at the cupolas and embrasures while heavier guns,

The calm after the storm . . . two German soldiers take a breather in a large crater beside Block 2 at La Ferté. On May 18, Stosstrupp Germer engineers managed to reach the block from this side, in order to blow off the gun turret and cupolas. They succeeded in knocking the AM turret askew, leaving it dislodged from its mounting, so effectively that it remains in this position even to this day. The GFM cupola on the right was the one in which three members of the fortress crew were killed by shellfire on May 18 — see page 9. (Bundesarchiv)

View from the top of Block 2 looking out across the picturesque Chiers valley. The knocked-out AM turret and pair of cupolas (AM on the left and GM on the right) remain almost unchanged

to this day, bearing silent witness to some dramatic hours in May 1940, in spite of nature's efforts to soften the scars. (Bundesarchiv)

Kings of all they survey . . . having taken La Ferté, these German troops can now relax and enjoy the view over the Chiers valley. Jammed by an artillery round in the raised position, the gun turret was especially vulnerable to the distinctly unwelcome attentions of Stosstrupp Germer's engineers as they picked their way cautiously over the fortress, blowing up the cupolas as they went. A discreetly placed explosive charge did the rest. (Bundesarchiv)

among them 210mm heavy mortars, smashed gaps in the barbed wire and blew craters that were to enable the engineers to approach unseen. The AM turret of Block 2, probably hit when firing at German troops on Hill 311, jammed in the firing position on May 18 and this badly reduced the already weak armament of the fortress. The 75mm turret of the neighbouring fortress of Le Chesnois fired in support of La Ferté for several days, lobbing more than 4,000 shells towards the fortress and the surrounding area, though the fire was not all that accurate as the guns were at the limit of their range.

On May 18 a counter-attack by two battalions of the 6ème Division d'Infanterie backed by some Renault B1bis of the 41ème BCC was launched to relieve the pressure but it failed. Three tanks were lost, the 'Charente' being disabled by a German anti-tank gun, the 'Muscadet' by its own side mistaking it for German and the 'Tarn' falling into the Chiers river, its entire crew being drowned.

The German infantry had reached the rear of the fortress and took the Casemate Ouest, which had been abandoned the day before by the artillery but reoccupied by a few infantry. Stosstrupp Germer, the German assault group assembled to disable the fortress, advanced to the edge of Villy, waiting for the artillery which ravaged the fortress to stop. In the evening, when the shelling lifted and moved down to the Chiers valley at the appointed hour, the Stosstrupp Germer engineers launched their assault on Block 2.

Save for the removal of some earth from around the base, the turret remains virtually unaltered. We were quite alone when we took these comparison pictures in May 1987 — our only companion being a brisk wind, whistling through the barbed wire. . . . The scars left by two direct hits, which have ricochetted off the thick, round steel plate, can still be seen as can the camouflage paintwork, although it is not quite so evident in this photograph.

A Propagandakompanie photographer snapped this shot of a few Germans ambling over the fort in the aftermath of battle somewhat like little boys exploring. The spang-marked walls of Block 2 provide ample evidence of the ferocity of the shellfire. The poignant grave markers of some of La Ferté's hapless crew, who lie at rest in the foreground, are also clearly visible. Seventeen of them remained here for thirty-three years before their temporary field graves were discovered just to the right from where this picture was taken, now marked by a touching memorial. (Bundesarchiv)

Dodging from one crater to another, they reached the superstructures and blew off the turret and the cupolas. After replenishing their supplies of explosive charges during a renewed bout of shelling, they assaulted Block 1 during the night, blowing off three of its four cupolas. The last one was blown at dawn on May 19.

At 6.15 a.m. on May 18 a direct hit on the GFM cupola on Block 2 had killed three men. Because of the very short time between the end of the shelling and the first of the charges blown by the engineers, the block's crew thought that these explosions were part of the bombardment and had not rushed to their posts. Stunned by the incredible destruction of all their weapons in Block 2, they had withdrawn towards Block 1, only to see it destroyed just as quickly. For some unknown reason, they all withdrew to the gallery, waiting for an order which never came. There they all suffocated as the air became poisoned by the smoke and fumes which drifted down from the fires raging in the blocks, the ventilation system being unable to cope amidst the damage. All telephone communication with Le Chesnois fortress ceased at 5.00 a.m. on May 19. The La Ferté crew had perished to a man in their stricken fortress.

A disciplinary unit sent by the 16. Armee arrived on June 8 and for three days worked hard to recover the dead, manhandling the decaying corpses from within the depths of the forts, in the poisonous atmosphere and with shelling going on outside, and then burying them in common graves. Most of them were reburied after the war but not until 1973 were the last seventeen missing bodies found in a grave in front of Block 2; among them was the fort commander, Lieutenant Maurice Bourguignon.

The Germans made the most in their propaganda of this capture of a fortress of the Maginot Line and dropped leaflets headlined 'Maginot Line, a common grave for those who defend it' which described how the bodies 'of your comrades were found, badly mutilated and burnt' in La Ferté. On May 19 the commander of Pionier-Bataillon 171, Oberleutnant Alfred Germer, who had led the assault at La Ferté, had the honour of being named in the Army report which proudly made known that the 'strong Panzerwerk 505 had been taken'. On May 26 Germer was awarded the Ritterkreuz.

The three other fortresses of the Montmédy sector, Le Chesnois, Thonnelle and Velosnes, were ordered to be sabotaged and abandoned on June 13 and 14 for a general withdrawal from the fortified line which placed them in hopelessly exposed positions.

Above: **The tranquil external appearance presented to the inquisitive Germans must have been quickly dispelled as they ventured inside La Ferté, to be faced with a virtual chamber of horrors in the gallery where the fortress personnel had suffocated whilst awaiting orders during the Stosstrupp Germer attack. This snapshot was taken by one of the more hardy individuals who ventured inside. Added to this memorial to the last seventeen crew members to be discovered, (*below*) on July 9, 1973, was a plaque from veterans of the 71. Infanterie-Division, honouring their former adversary.**

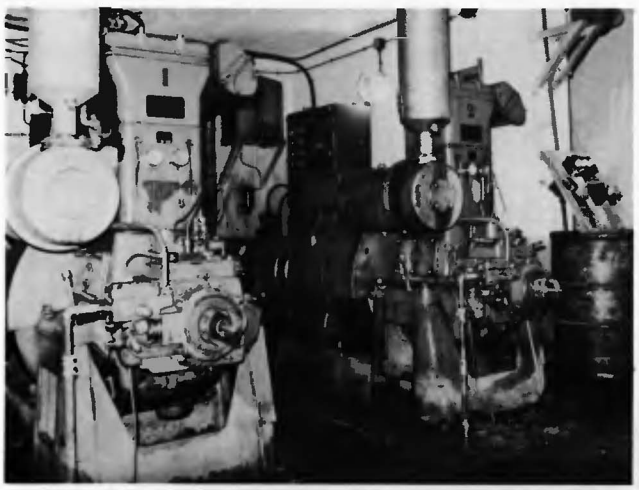
Lieutenant Maurice Bourguignon was the commander of the fourth company of 155ème RIF, about one hundred men strong, which manned La Ferté. He died alongside his men in their stricken fortress on May 19 ... but his remains were not recovered until July 1973 when the last seventeen missing bodies were found in a common grave near Block 2. He now rests, among other members of his crew, in the small military cemetery that was built beside the D52, opposite the memorial erected near Block 2 to commemmorate the tragic end of the fortress and its personnel.

Because of the tragedy at La Ferté the fortress has something of a particular significance, and a visit has more to it, say, than one to an ordinary museum. A monument has been built beside the D52 to commemorate the tragic end of the fortress and the death of its 104 crew, and opposite the road stands a small military cemetery in which several of them, including their commander, Lieutenant Bourguignon, rest today. A remembrance ceremony is held each year on the Sunday nearest to May 19.

The fortress was bought in the early seventies by an association, the Comité du Souvenir des Défenseurs de Villy-La Ferté, of which the cities of Villy and La Ferté are both members. It is open to visitors except during the winter. A visit, which lasts about an hour and a half, begins at Block 1, where a small museum has been installed in one of the rooms. There is a slide presentation to be seen on the Maginot Line and the tragic events at the fortress. On your way to Block 2 you pass the fatal gallery where the men suffocated to death in May 1940. After visiting Block 2, you continue outside to see the superstructure and the cemetery nearby before walking through the network of barbed wire and returning to Block 1.

Open from 1.30 p.m. to 5.00 p.m. during April and October, Sundays and holidays only; May, June and September, Saturdays, Sundays and holidays only; July and August, every day, Sundays and holidays included.

Visits can be arranged for groups at any time throughout the year. Application should be made about ten days in advance by telephoning 24 22 60 83. Admission 10 francs, half-price for groups.



Left: **The generating room at La Ferté was equipped with a pair of SMiM generators of 75hp. Due to the fact that they are situated at the lower level of the fort, they are still in perfect working order — very useful for the museum!** *Right:* **The barbed wire defences at La Ferté have been left just as they were in 1940 — the gaps blown by German shellfire being augmented by gaps created by the ravage of time; nature having been hard at work hiding the scars.**

FERMONT

One of the three major fortresses of the La Crusnes Fortified Sector, Fermont fortress (A2) stands in the Chiers valley between Longuyon and Longwy. It is by the D174, a few kilomètres south of the village of Fermont.

The La Crusnes Fortified Sector was responsible for the frontier from Marville, eighteen kilometres west of Longuyon, to Dudelange, about twenty kilometres north of Thionville. The fifty kilometres of front were protected by three major fortresses, four minor fortresses and thirty-six casemates, stretching from the minor fortress of Ferme Chappy (A1), to the west; to another minor fortress, Aumetz (A7), to the east. There were also one shelter and five observatories. The major fortress of Fermont was the second on the left of the La Crusnes sector.

Fermont had seven battle blocks and the usual two entrance blocks:

Block 1: one 75mm turret, one GFM cupola and one LG cupola.
Block 2: one MI turret and one GFM cupola.
Block 3: one GFM cupola, two JM cupolas and one observation cupola.
Block 4: three 75mm embrasures, one GFM cupola and one JM cupola.
Block 5: one 81mm turret and one GFM cupola.
Block 6: one MI turret and two GFM cupolas.
Block 7: one 47mm AT/Reibel JM embrasure, one Reibel JM embrasure, one GFM cupola and one LG cupola.

Its entrances were of the shaft kind. Protecting the munitions and supplies entrance was a 47mm AT/Reibel JM embrasure, two GFM cupolas and one LG cupola. The personnel entrance was protected by a 47mm AT/Reibel JM embrasure and two GFM cupolas.

The battle crew consisted of 19 officers and 553 men of the 149ème RIF and 152ème RAP. When the fortress came under attack in June 1940 it was under the command of Capitaine Daniel Aubert, who had taken charge on May 16.

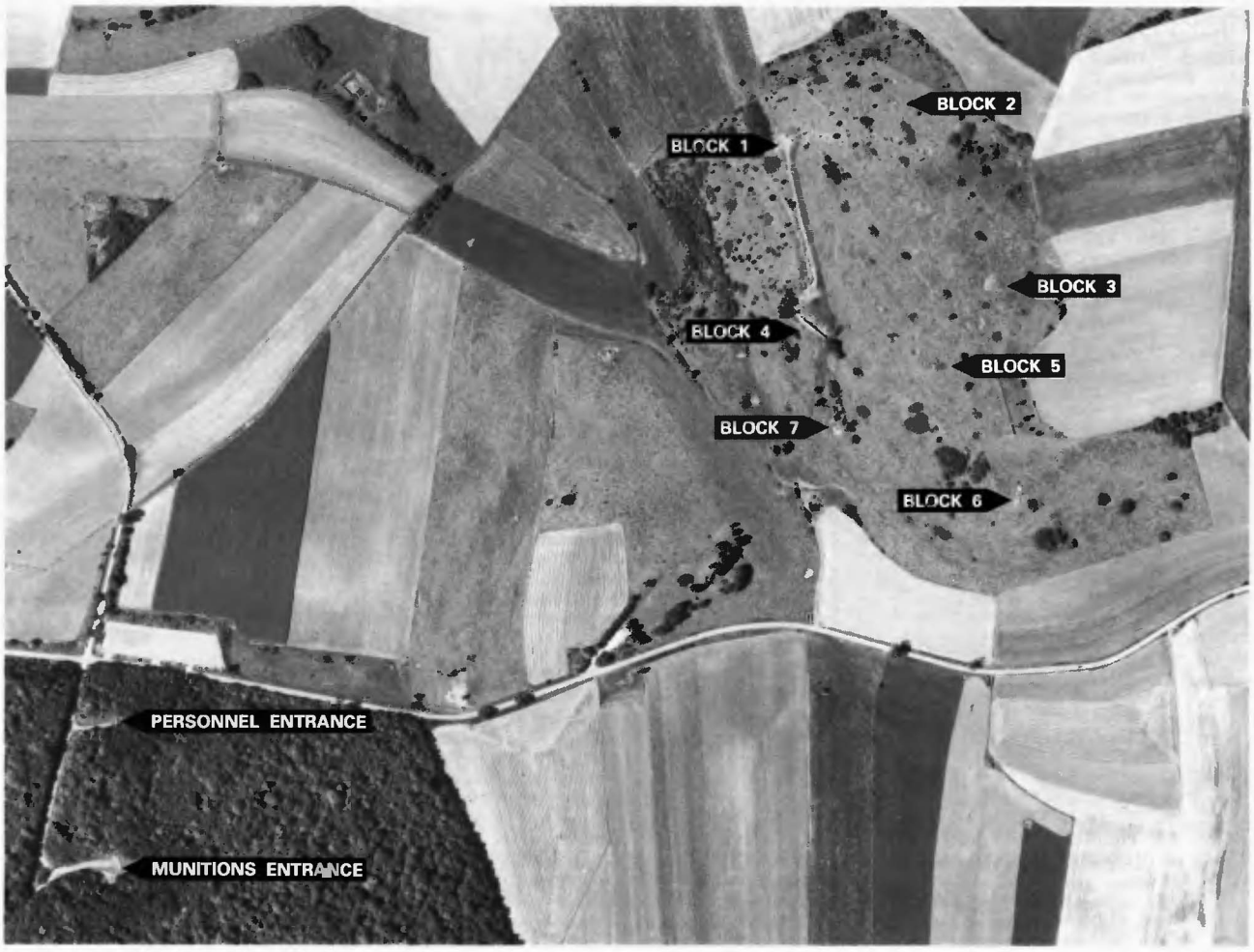
In January 1940, the La Crusnes Fortified Sector Command was disbanded and tactical control of this sector on the left flank of the 3ème Armée was taken over by the XXXXIIème Corps d'Armée de Forteresse. After the Germans had entered Luxembourg and Belgium on May 10, the fortress fired its first shells in anger on May 12 when the 75mm turret of Block 1 ranged to the north on German troops moving along roads near the border. Three days later the 75mm howitzers of Blocks 1 and 4 fired in support of the neighbouring fortress of Latiremont. Fermont then passed a relatively uneventful month, its artillery harassing any German troops which dared to come within range, and suffered only intermittent artillery bombardment which caused no damage. The fortress received its last supplies of ammunition on the night of June 10 and of food two nights later.

From about June 11 German pressure mounted and patrols tried repeatedly to force a way through the barbed wire. After the general withdrawal order issued by 3ème Armée, the interval troops withdrew during the night of June 13 followed by part of the sector fortress troops organised into Groupement Florian. With the front crumbling further to the west, the situation on the left wing of the army was critical and there was no chance of conducting the stage-by-stage withdrawal of supporting troops and garrisons decided upon by the army staff. The commander of Latiremont fortress, Commandant Max Pophillat, took command of the fortress line on the left wing of the sector. At Fermont on June 14 Capitaine Aubert issued an order of the day: 'to hold as long as possible, that must be our unshakeable resolve'.

As the French pulled back, the 169. Infanterie-Division flanked the fortress line and moved eastwards to its rear, aiming at Metz, while the 183. Infanterie-Division which followed advanced in the direction of Thionville. The Fermont guns shelled the German convoys on every road within range, making them use more distant ones, but could do nothing to hamper the movement of anything out of range. On June 15 the Germans found the main electricity supply for the fortress at Xivry-Circourt and cut it off, forcing Fermont to start up its own generators. The 161. Infanterie-Division then took on the left wing of the Line and advanced on the rear of the fortress.

The munitions and supplies entrance at Fermont is well preserved today . . . one can well appreciate the difficulties in attacking such a position, protected by a 47mm AT/Reibel JM embrasure plus three light machine gun posts and a pair of GFM cupolas protecting the entrance. Displayed outside is a narrow-gauge rail car as used to carry the supplies to the entrance — see page 5.

Block 4 at Fermont nestling in a lunar landscape in 1987, complete with three 75mm embrasures and GFM cupola.



All of the blocks together with each of their turrets and cupolas and even some of the craters caused by German shelling are visible on this 1970s-vintage aerial view of the Fermont fortress complex. The road running along the bottom of the picture is the D174. (IGN)

On June 17 the heat in the power-house at Fermont was unbearable, for the generators were now running continuously, and the engineers decided to increase the ventilation there. They were working on this, using cutting torches, when a drop of molten iron started a fire. It was brought under control, though all those in the power-house were affected to some extend by the smoke. That day, an 88mm Flak which had been brought up to the rear of the fortress and concealed east of Longuyon suddenly started to shell Block 4, one shell crashing every three minutes on the same spot between guns 1 and 2. The mist, then the glare of the sun which rose behind the gun, made it impossible to see precisely where it was, but no-one was unduly perturbed as the concrete was 1.75 metres thick there. The shells kept on smashing into it, until midday when one burst through and fell inside, just beside a tray packed with 75mm shells. Bits of concrete blew in but there were no casualties. By chance, maybe because the Germans were aware that they no longer had the sun behind them and could expect more accurate return fire, or they felt they stood little chance of making much of an impression on the evidently solid block, the gun crew decided after this very shell that it was time to find a new target. Thus Block 4 was spared — its ammunition likely to have gone up with the next shell to erupt within. During the night, the breach in the concrete, two metres in diameter on the outside and one metre inside, was patched with a couple of iron plates and filled with concrete.

Over the next three days the fortress suffered continous artillery bombardment. Its 75mm and 81mm guns fired back and the machine guns kept any attackers at bay. The Germans decided that it was time they took care of this troublesome fortress and brought forward more and more artillery until they had in position six batteries of 105mm, two batteries of 88mm, three 210mm heavy mortars and four 305mm heavy mortars of schwere Artillerie-Abteilung 641. At 4.00 a.m. on June 21 a massive artillery bombardment opened up. At 6.00 a.m. the intensity of the shelling decreased and the watch climbed quickly into their cupolas to see German infantry approaching through the barbed wire smashed open by the explosions. The 75mm turret of Block 1 fired shrapnel, the 81mm turret of Block 5 lobbed its bombs, and every machine gun hammered away. Block 6 of Latiremont, firing in support, brought its three 75mm howitzers into action. Fermont's turrets too fired in support of its neighbour to the west, the fortress at Chappy, which was also attacked. In the late morning the Germans withdrew, having suffered heavy losses and failed to get near any of the blocks. In the afternoon, they approached Fermont with white flags, asking for a cease-fire in order to collect their dead and wounded lying all around the fortress, to which Capitaine Aubert agreed. While German casualties amounted to about eighty, the fortress had only one wounded — Soldat Denis Guissard, badly hit when a heavy shell exploded just beside the GFM cupola from which he was firing — and one dead — Soldat Florian Piton, killed when a 37mm anti-tank shell hit the slit of the GFM cupola in which he was on watch at the personnel entrance. A violent bombardment resumed at about 6.00 p.m. when the Germans had recovered all their fallen comrades. In the evening they found a communications box and cut the cables, ending all telephone communication between Fermont and Latiremont.

But for the ceremony when Florian Piton was buried on June 22 in a grave dug out of the wall of the main thoroughfare and the customary shelling, the few days until the armistice were uneventful. At Fermont, the firing had not ceased at the time set for the end of hostilities at 12.35 a.m. as a number of Germans remained unaware of the arrangements. The fortress returned fire and it was another hour before the guns of the two sides fell silent. A German emissary appeared in the afternoon but Capitaine Aubert informed him that he would only accept orders from Commandant Pophillat. On the afternoon of June 26 Capitaine Aubert received written orders from him to leave the fortress as it was and to proceed to a camp at Doncourt. Fermont was vacated the following day — the Tricolour at the head of the column, the officers retaining their weapons. Disillusionment soon to set in, when it became apparent that they were to be considered as prisoners-of-war in spite of not having surrendered.

Commandant Pophillat had acted on his own, in anticipation of the orders that were to follow, of which he was notified by the French High Command's envoy, Colonel Marion, on July 1 when with the commander of the sector's right wing, Commandant Maurice Vanier, he was called to see the colonel at Errouville.

The beautiful view as seen from the crest of Block 5 at Fermont. Note the GFM observation cupola and the lowered 81mm mortar turret in the foreground. Away on the right is the GFM cupola of Block 4.

Capitaine Aubert refused to accept such a fate and escaped from the cage at Metz at the end of the month to join the Free French in Africa; he was to be killed in action in Tunisia on January 21, 1943. In July the Germans made a propaganda film purporting to show what they had in fact failed to accomplish — the capture of Fermont — and in the process their artillery badly damaged Blocks 4 and 7.

The French Army repaired all the damage just after the war and the fortress was given up in 1964. After two years of badgering the relevent authorities, a group of enthusiasts, the Association des Amis de l'Ouvrage du Fermont, obtained the keys to the place on July 1, 1976. They worked hard to get it into decent order, and Fermont was opened to the public in June 1977, proving a great success.

A visit begins at the ammunition and supplies entrance, where an 88mm Flak 36, a 75mm Pak 40 and several vehicles can be seen. The main lift takes you down below, and to a museum containing interesting weapons, documents and equipment, including a 135mm heavy mortar, 81mm mortar, 75mm howitzer, 47mm anti-tank gun and a Reibel twin mounting. . . . The light railway then carries you for about a kilometre along the main thoroughfare to the battle blocks. After ascending in the lift to Block 4, there are the 75mm embrasures to be seen. You leave the block via the emergency exit for the top of the fortress. During the walk to Block 1 to see the 75mm turret, a view is to be had of the entire layout of the fortress; still to be seen are the large craters blown by the heavy German shells in June 1940. Returning below ground and descending by lift to the light railway, you are carried back to the rear for a tour of the first aid station, the sleeping quarters, kitchen and power-house, before being taken up to the entrance level by the main lift.

Open throughout May, June, July, August and September, Sundays and holidays included, from 1.30 p.m. to 5.00 p.m. During the months of April and October: Saturdays and Sundays only.

Special arrangements can be made for any day of the year for parties of at least forty; application to be made about ten days in advance — telephone 82 39 35 34 or 82 89 66 51.

Admission 18 francs; lower rates may apply for parties.

Printed publications — among them an interesting brochure on the Fermont fortress written by Georges Maistret — and postcards can be bought at the end of your visit.

Looking like a man-made pimple, this is the Mi turret of Block 6 — taken in 1987. The turret is so well preserved that the picture looks as though it could equally have been taken forty-seven years ago in 1940!

IMMERHOF

One of the four minor fortresses of the Thionville Fortified Sector, Immerhof fortress (A10) stands just north of the D15, between Kanfen, to the north-west, and Soetrich, to the east, about ten kilometres north of Thionville.

The Thionville Fortified Sector was responsible for the frontier from Dudelange, twenty kilometres north of Thionville, to Launstroff, about ten kilometres east of Sierck. With the Moselle valley running through its centre, the sector was highly vulnerable and it had been well protected with seven major fortresses, four minor fortresses and seventeen casemates. The fortifications stretched from the major fortress of Rochonvillers (A8), to the west, to another major fortress, Billig (A18), to the east. There were also eighteen infantry shelters and four observatories. Immerhof was the third fortress from the left of the Thionville sector.

The Immerhof fortress had three battle blocks and one entrance block:

Block 1: one MI turret and two GFM cupolas.

Block 2: one MI turret and two GFM cupolas.

Block 3: one 81mm turret, one GFM cupola and one Reibel JM embrasure.

The entrance block was protected by a 47mm AT/Riebel JM embrasure, two GFM cupolas and one LG cupola.

Capitaine Pierre Requiston leads the 4ème CEO (Companie d'Equipage d'Ouvrage — Fortress Crew Company) of 168 ème RIF as the men parade through Hettange-Grande early in 1939. Capitaine Requiston was the CO of the Immerhof fortress in May 1940, commanding the contingent of 5 officers and 193 men of the 168ème RIF and the 151ème RAP.

Above: **The gateway to the underworld at Immerhof, showing its armament of a 47mm embrasure on the left (in the shadow).** *Below:* **Seeing is not always believing — two or three armoured cupolas? Whilst that of Block 1 (foreground) and that of Block 2 (background) are genuine, the middle one is a dummy, intended to draw an attacker's fire.**

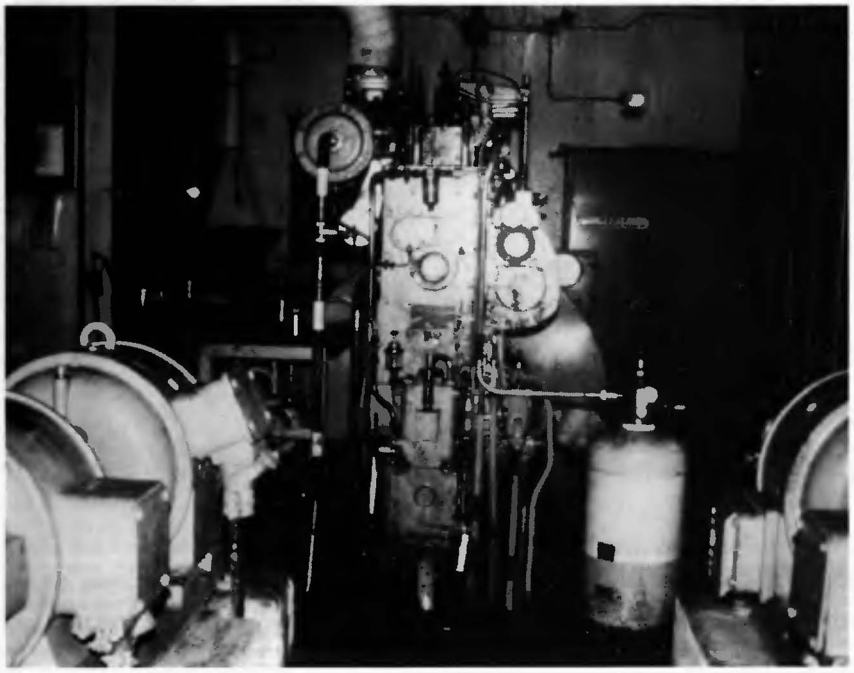
In 1940 the Immerhof fortress was under the command of Capitaine Pierre Requiston; it had an establishment of 5 officers and 193 men of the 168ème RIF and 151ème RAP.

In May 1940 the VIème Corps d'Armée of the 3ème Armée had assumed tactical control within the Thionville Fortified Sector; and for all this part of the Maginot Line the early weeks of the campaign were uneventful except for desultory shelling. Around June 13, when the interval troups had started to withdraw, command of the troops remaining in the Thionville sector fortifications passed to Colonel Jean-Patrice O'Sullivan, formerly in charge of the sector's infantry units.

On June 14 the fortress suffered its first casualties when at about 10.30 p.m. one of the patrols which were sent out every night to check that the Germans were not trying to cut ways through the barbed wire were spotted and shelled. Caporal André Rabu was killed, the only soldier to be killed at Immerhof, two other men being badly wounded.

On the morning of June 15 a gas alert was sounded after an outbreak of artillery shelling left strange white smoke drifting overhead, and the fortress ventilation system was turned to 'air gassed'. Tests showed that it was a false alarm and everything returned to normal after ten minutes or so. That day, Capitaine Requiston was told by Colonel O'Sullivan of the withdrawal that was to be carried out. As in most of the fortresses, the men learnt of this order with frustrated disbelief which often turned to anger: apart from La Ferté, the Germans had not taken a single fortress of the Maginot Line; in the knowledge that they had not been beaten, men could not understand why they should leave their fortresses to the Germans.

The first part of the withdrawal went as planned and part of the sector fortress troops organised into Division de Marche Poisot left. Among them were two officers and seventy men who had moved out from Immerhof at about 10.00 p.m. on June 15. Further withdrawals being made impossible by the rapidly changing situation to the south and west, the reduced garrison were informed that they were to fight to the end. The 183. Infanterie-Division were soon at the rear of the fortress line and took Thionville. On June 16 an explosion shook the 81mm turret of Block 3 but the fire which



The excellent state of preservation within the Immerhof fortress is amply demonstrated here by these views of one of the Renault generators in the generating room (*above*) and the banks of filters dated July 1937 in the air filtration plant (*below*). The system was actually turned over to 'air gassed' following the June 15 artillery bombardment, when smoke shells were mistaken for the dreaded gas shells, so common a feature of the Great War which had itself inspired the creation of the Maginot Line in the first place.

followed was rapidly brought under control by the crew. The pressure began to mount in the days that followed, and German patrols got close enough to train machine guns at the cupolas but were driven off by their return fire. The troops endured the heat inside the fortress as the days wore on uneventfully except for sporadic shelling until the fateful cease-fire of 12.35 a.m. on June 25.

At about 5.45 p.m. on June 26 the fortress received a message from Colonel O'Sullivan, whose command post was now at the Metrich fortress, indicating that the fortifications on the left bank of the Moselle river had been placed under the commander of the Kobenbusch fortress, Commandant Lucien Charnal, and telling them to prepare to surrender Immerhof intact. Commandant Charnal discussed the handing over of the nine fortresses under his command with the commander of the 183. Infanterie-Division, General-major Benigmus Dippold, and agreed to their being vacated on June 30. The actual surrender was signed on July 1 when Commandant Charnal met the French High Command's envoy, Colonel Marion, at the Kobenbusch fortress.

As ordered, Immerhof surrendered to the men of the Infanterie-Regiment 351 on June 30. Having surrendered after the armistice, the men thought for a while that they would not be regarded as prisoners-of-war, and the fact that the Germans had allowed them to keep their hand-guns, though without ammunition, had tended to bolster this mistaken impression. They stayed in a barracks at Hettange for few days, and it was only as they began to march to the railway station — and captivity — that they saw that the Germans did not intend to differentiate between troops who had surrendered and those who had not.

The fortress was purchased by the city of Hettange-Grande in 1974 and restored, since when it has been open to the general public. Thanks to the way it had been built, it was in a very good state internally compared to others; for instead of being built underground, the site had been excavated and the fortress then covered over, elaborate measures having been taken to guard against the penetration of damp.

Visits begin at the entrance block, which is to be seen in all its detail, and plans and history are explained. Visitors then walk along the main throroughfare to see the power-house, the kitchen, the sleeping quarters, and then the command post in which a small museum has been set up. You ascend to have a look inside Block 1 (fifty steps), with its MI turret, and then make your way down and along the main thoroughfare to Block 3. Here, the 81mm turret can be seen 'in action', moving up and down and rotating. Having looked over it from the inside, you can then view it from above after walking outside to investigate the block's superstructure before returning to the exit.

Immerhof is open to the public on the second and fourth Sundays of June, July and August and on public holidays during these months (usually Whit-Monday, the 14th of July and the Feast of the Assumption on August 15). Opening hours: 2.00 p.m. to 5.00 p.m.

Visits can always be arranged at any time during the year for parties of at least twenty-five people; application should be made about ten days in advance by telephoning 82 53 10 02.

Admission is 13 francs, with a reduction for parties. A brochure telling the story of the fortress and postcards can be purchased.

ZEITERHOLZ

One of the eighteen 'abris' of the Thionville Fortified Sector, the Zeiterholz shelter stands a few kilometres to the rear of the line of fortresses and casemates, hidden at the edge of a wood of the same name. It is at Entrange, about six kilometres north of Thionville and just two kilometres south-west of the Immerhof fortress.

This two-storey shelter was completed in 1934 as a sheltered barracks and command HQ for the interval troops serving along this part of the Line. Its facilities included sleeping quarters, a kitchen, washing and lavatory facilities, an infirmary, and a command and communications room. Electricity was supplied from its power-house; the ventilation system could clear the shelter in the event of gas attack. It had two GFM cupolas for its own defence. When the war began, the shelter was the base for about a hundred men of the 169ème RIF under the command of Capitaine Henri Jarssela.

The city of Entrange owns the shelter, and visits are organised by a 'Friends of the Forts' enthusiasts association — Amifort. A guided tour, which lasts about an hour and an half, begins with a slide show on the Maginot Line. This presentation is followed by a tour of the different installations, all of them in their original state and perfect shape, including the two diesel generators which still supply the building with electricity. The tour ends at the fortress museum, which displays a selection of the weapons used on the Line, among them the 25mm anti-tank gun which equipped the AM turrets and cupolas.

Open from 2.00 p.m. to 5.00 p.m. on the first and third Sundays of June, July and August and on the public holidays during these months (usually Whit-Monday, the 14th of July and the Feast of the Assumption on August 15).

Visits for parties of thirty of more can always be arranged — apply ten days beforehand: telephone 82 55 10 46.

Admission 10 francs; less for parties.

HACKENBERG

One of the four major fortresses of the Boulay Fortified Sector, the Hackenberg fortress (A19) stands in the Forêt des Quatre Seigneurs, about fifteen kilomètres east of Thionville, a few hundred metres above the village of Veckring on the D60.

The Boulay Fortified Sector was responsible for the frontier from Launstroff, about ten kilometres east of Sierck, to Coume, about five kilometres north-east of Boulay. The sector was protected by four major fortresses, eleven minor fortresses and seventeen casemates, from the major fortress of Hackenberg, to the west, to the minor fortress of Mottenberg (A33), to the east. There were also fourteen shelters and two observatories. Hackenberg was the first fortress on the left wing of the Boulay sector.

The largest fortress of the Maginot Line, Hackenberg had seventeen battle blocks and the usual two entrance blocks. The battle blocks were in fact organised in two groups, linked by a large ditch: Blocks 1 to 6 constituted the eastern group, Blocks 7 to 10 the western, while Blocks 21 to 25 covered the ditch with their fire. Blocks 11 and 12 were observation blocks at an altitude of 343 metres.

Block 1: one MI turret.
Block 2: one 75mm turret and two GFM cupolas.
Block 3: one 81mm turret and one GFM cupola.
Block 4: one Reibel JM embrasure, one 37mm AT/Riebel JM embrasure, one MI turret and two GFM cupolas.
Block 5: three 75mm howitzer embrasures, two GFM cupolas and one LG cupola.
Block 6: one 135mm turret and one GFM cupola.
Block 7: one Reibel JM embrasure, one 37mm AT/Riebel JM embrasure, one MI turret and two GFM cupolas.
Block 8: three 75mm howitzer embrasures and two GFM cupolas.
Block 9: one 135mm embrasure, one 135mm turret and two GFM cupolas.
Block 10: one 81mm turret and two GFM cupolas.
Block 11: one GFM cupola and one observation cupola.
Block 12: one GFM cupola and one observation cupola.
Block 21: two Reibel JM embrasures, one 50mm mortar embrasure and one GFM cupola.
Block 22: one Reibel JM embrasure, one GFM cupola and one JM cupola.

Above: **The anti-tank ditch which protected the western part of Hackenberg on its northern flank. Block 24 is visible uphill. View looking east, with the fortress out of sight on the right.** *Below:* **This rail and barbed wire entanglement surrounded the four battle blocks of the western group. (ECP Armées)**

Ammunition crates are loaded onto flat cars in M1, the fortress's main magazine. In this instance, these are metallic cases holding fifty 75mm shells. (ECP Armées)

Block 23: two GFM cupolas and one LG cupola.
Block 24: two Reibel JM embrasures, one 50mm mortar embrasure and two GFM cupolas.
Block 25: one 75mm howitzer embrasure, one Reibel JM embrasure, one 50mm mortar embrasure and one GFM cupola.

The entrance blocks led directly into the fortress. That for munitions and supplies was protected by a 47mm AT/Reibel JM embrasure and two GFM cupolas, and that for personnel by a 47mm AT/Riebel JM embrasure, two GFM cupolas and one LG cupola.

Manning the fortress were 42 officers and 1,040 men of the 164ème RIF and 153ème RAP. In June 1940 the fortress commander was Commandant Henri Ebrard.

In May 1940 the VIème Corps d'Armée assumed tactical control within the sector. The 51st (Highland) Division of the British Expeditionary Force held the part of the line in front of the Hackenberg fortress until May 22 when it was relieved and assembled near Etain.

The 75mm turret of Block 2 at Hackenberg opened fire for the first time in anger on May 13 but the succeeding weeks were relatively uneventful in the sector. After the withdrawal ordered by the 3ème Armée, the

interval troops and elements of the fortress troops, the latter organised into an improvised Division de Marche Besse, began to pull out. On the evening of June 13 the 5,000 or so troops remaining in the sector's fortresses were placed under the sector's infantry commander, Colonel Raoul Cochinard, with the task of covering the withdrawal before they too left. Reorganisation involved the commander of the Hackenberg fortress, Commandant Henri Ebrard, taking over the whole of the Hombourg-Budange area from Casemates C53 and C54 at Hummersberg, to the west, to the minor fortress of Hobling, to the east.

From June 15, the pressure mounted and German patrols approached the fortress to sound out its defences. The general situation made it impossible for the second stage of the withdrawal to be carried out; Colonel Cochinard ordered the fortresses to fight to the end and installed his command post in the Anzeling fortress.

On June 15, when the 135mm heavy mortars of Block 9 fired to repel German infantry trying to advance between the Billig fortress and the Hummersberg casemates, a malfunction disabled the turret — despite duplicate security systems, the right-hand gun of the turret fired when it was retracted, the resulting explosion destroying the piece and badly wounding two gunners. During the night of June 16 German patrols probed above the fortress and near the entrances, throwing smoke grenades to conceal their movements. A more powerful move between the two casemates at Hummersberg was shelled by the Hackenberg's artillery. The following day a German patrol was surprised in the barbed wire in front of Block 25; two men got back, driven off by machine gun fire, while an officer, Oberleutnant Paul Siebold of Infanterie-Regiment 315, was wounded and taken prisoner. In the evening the fortress shelled woods to the north where enemy concentrations had been observed.

Early on June 18 the watch reported mysterious signals being flashed from the vicinity of a nearby chapel, and during the day German troops were spotted in the villages to the rear of the fortress. These were the first elements of the 95. Infanterie-Division which had turned westwards to occupy the rear of the fortress line after the 1. Armee breakthrough in the Sarre.

For the four next days Hackenberg suffered from the attention of the German

Above: **A nicely staged shot of two NCOs leading their sections in perfect order into the M1 railway station at Hackenberg's supply/munitions entrance.** *Below:* **When we took our comparison in May, 1987 we found that a sizeable part of the wiring and wall fittings have been removed and altered. The gallery on the left leads into the M1 magazine; that on the right is the main one through the fort — the entrance is behind the photographer. (ECP Armées)**

This however must remain one of the best comparisons to be had at Hackenberg: taken at the junction of the bottom of Block 9, the main thoroughfare is at centre, with the way to Block 10 on the left and that to Block 8 on the right. Apart from the addition of some different lighting, the view remains unchanged more than forty years on, with all the original wiring and fittings in place — even the mock wallpaper decoration on the walls remains untouched. (ECP Armées)

The retraction and elevation of the 135mm turret of Block 9 is demonstrated to a group of visiting British officers in 1939-40 (*top and above*). It appears that one of them has cut a bunch of mistletoe, perhaps in anticipation of an eventful Christmas! *Below:* Today, the same turret is demonstrated to visitors to Hackenberg, in fact the only part of its operation not demonstrated to visitors is the turret being fired! (ECP Armées)

artillery which fired repeated barrages at the fortress but with no visible results. The fortress's artillery fired co-ordinated barrages with the guns of the neighbourg fortresses to shell any suspected targets within range: enemy concentrations, artillery observers, batteries approaching to the rear. . . . On June 22 the Germans concentrated on the Michelsberg fortress and during the afternoon, after a battery of 88mm Flak guns had fired two hundred shells at its Blocks 2 and 3, emissaries approached the fortress under white flags. The commander, Commandant Jules Pelletier, met them at the entrance and in reply to their demand for surrender informed them that he intended to carry out orders and 'fight to the end'. To show what that meant, Commandant Ebrard ordered a co-ordinated barrage to be fired by six turrets at areas occupied by the Germans.

The artillery duel continued on June 23 and 24, the German infantry making determined attacks on the neighbouring fortresses at Coucou and Mont des Welches but to no avail. At 10.15 p.m. news of the armistice came over the radio and of the cease-fire which was to come into effect at 1.35 a.m. This was confirmed some time later by Colonel Cochinard, who made it clear that 'until further orders' there was to be no movement out of the fortresses and that any emissaries that might appear must be sent to him at Anzeling. Meanwhile, Hackenberg was heavily shelled and together with its neighbours fired co-ordinated barrages in return. Commandant Ebrard stated that he would call a halt only when the Germans themselves did so. At the appointed hour, silence descended over the fortifications.

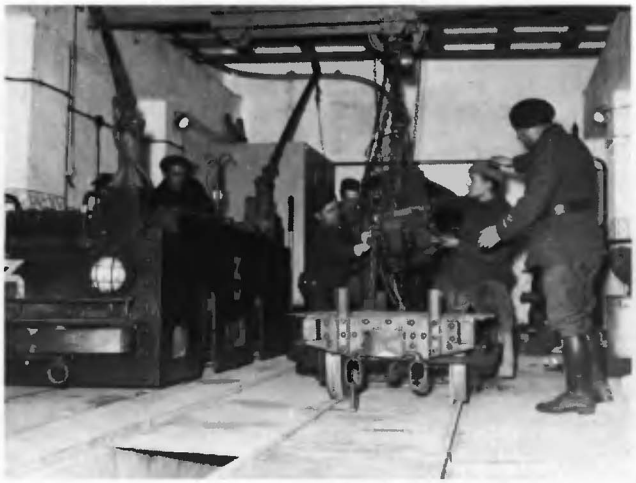
Oberst Fritz Hoffmann commanding Infanterie-Regiment 278 approached the Anzeling fortress early on the morning of June 25 and met Colonel Cochinard but the latter refused to surrender his fortresses without a direct order from the French High Command.

At Hackenberg, two French soldiers were killed and two seriously injured on the 26th when removing French anti-personnel mines outside the fortress. On the 28th a group of German soldiers watching the evening's ceremony of lowering the flag were taken to task by the French NCO in charge for failing to salute it, and complied.

The High Command envoy Colonel Pierre Marion arrived at Anzeling on the morning of June 30, bringing the instructions for an unconditional surrender to Colonel Cochinard. He then took him to the headquarters of Höheres Kommando z.b.V. XXXXV where, together with Colonel O'Sullivan and Commandant Adolphe Denoix, they met Oberstleutnant Hans von Ziegesar, the corps' chief of staff. After much difficulty and discussion, because they could not accept the idea of seeing their men become prisoners of war when they had not been captured, the commanders of the fortified sectors of Thionville, Boulay and Faulquemont signed the surrender of the fortresses under their command.

On July 4, except for some fifty-five men that the Germans detailed to remain behind for essential maintenance, the garrison vacated their unvanquished fortress and marched off towards the prisoner-of-war camps.

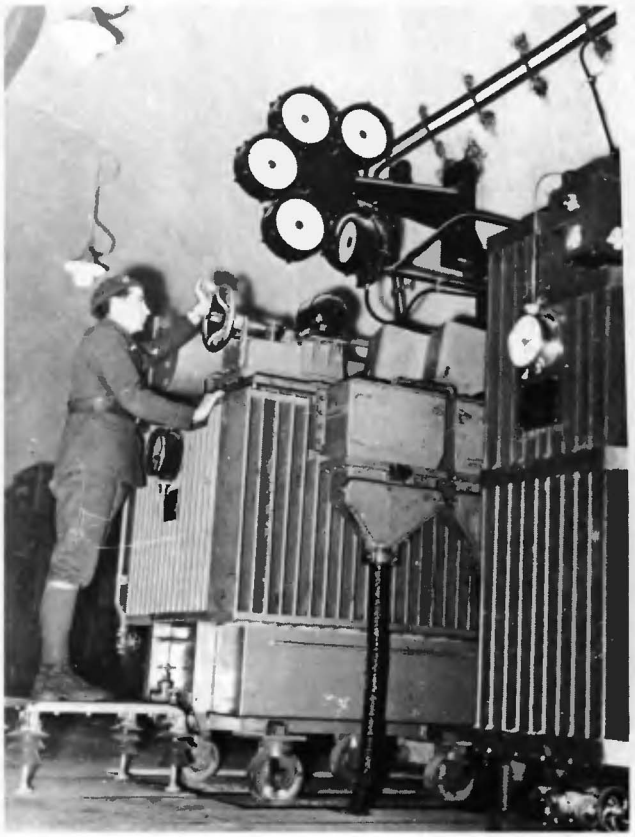
During the war the Germans installed a factory for the Klockner-Humbold-Deutz concern in Hackenberg and made various alterations that this required. Production had ceased and most of the factory had been evacuated when American forces approached in November 1944. On November 15 German gunners manning the 75mm howitzers of Block 8 shelled the 357th Infantry Regiment as it advanced near Buding and inflicted heavy casualties on the Americans. A 155mm self-propelled gun was brought up the following day and silenced the block, badly damaging it.

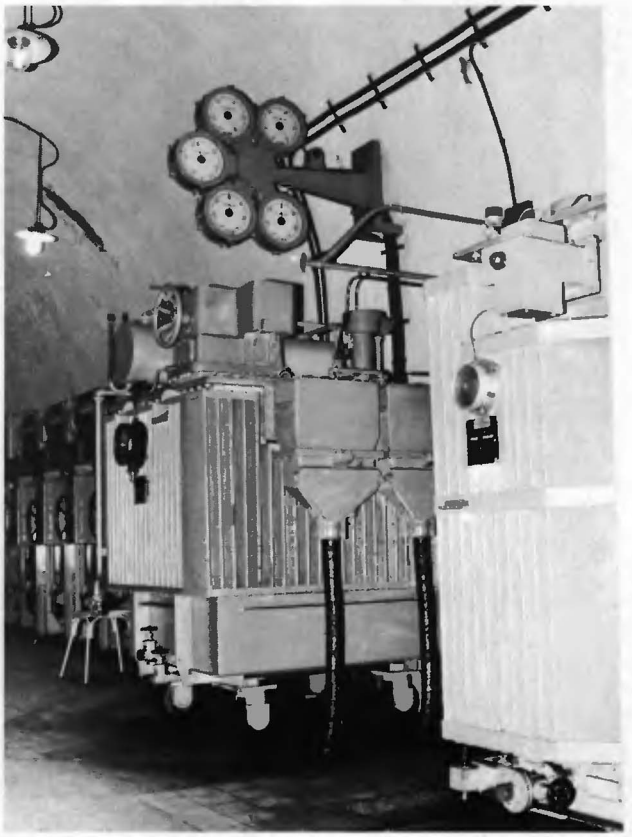


Left: **Under the Sergeant's supervision, one of the little flat-bed railway cars is loaded whilst the locomotive and driver wait patiently. The three such locos at Hackenberg were all of SW manufacture, weighing five and a half tons and having a 39hp engine.** *Right:* **The 600-volt power line is still in use today, as are the locos — Jean Christophe or one of his counterparts will drive you the two kilometres from the entrance station to the bottom of Block 9 on your visit. Note that there are two arms on the loco — one for picking up current when travelling in one direction; one for the other. (ECP Armées)**

The French Army repaired the fortress after the war, though not the badly weakened Block 8, but closed it in November 1970 and abandoned its maintenance. In 1975 the army agreed to the enthusiasts association Amifort taking it over, to restore and open it up as worthy of preservation. Since August 1975 thousands of visitors have had the opportunity of seeing this amazing piece of military technology, the British ones following in the footsteps of King George VI, who was shown over Hackenberg on December 9, 1939 by the French C-in-C, Général Gamelin.

A visit lasts about two and a half hours and begins at the ammunition and supplies entrance where, after a general introduction, the drawbridge and the steel shuttered doorway are explained. You are then conducted to the fortress's light railway station at the entrance end of the main thoroughfare, then to the main ammunition depot, to the kitchen and to the power-house to see the transformers and four 230 KVA generators, one of the generators being started up and run for you. In a large museum area — two galleries of the former barracks and the fortress hospital — a wide selection of the fortress's weaponry is displayed plus various items of equipment, with several dummies dressed in full battle kit. Boarding the light railway, you are then transported for about two kilometres along the main thoroughfare up to the battle blocks. A lift takes you up to Block 9. Here you can see the 135mm heavy mortars in the block's embrasure and turret — the latter 'in action' from both inside the block and from outside after leaving by the emergency exit for the roof. Continuing outside, at Block 8 can be seen the damage caused by the American





Another seemingly posed photograph of a somewhat self-conscious engineer adjusting one of the transformer settings in the power-house in 1939. Note that he is standing on an isolated platform to prevent any unpleasantness with the current! But for the disappearance of one dial, the one being scrutinised by the engineer, the transformers are unchanged in 1987 when we took our comparison — apart from the cover, left lying loose on the transformer's top in the 1939 shot, replaced today. Perhaps Jean Paul was a little apprehensive about removing it! (ECP Armées)

Volume 1

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Roger A. Freeman

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Chris Way

GLENN MILLER IN BRITAIN THEN AND NOW

A mass of information supported by over 400 photos. It's a fascinating book, beautifully produced — I keep picking it up. Malcolm Laycock, BBC BIG BAND ERA, BBC Radio 2

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Edited by Winston G. Ramsey

Volume 1

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MANCHESTER EVENING NEWS

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Tony Le Tissier

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In this revised edition of *The Somme Then and Now*, published on the 70th anniversary of the start of the 'Big Push', John Giles has succeeded in recapturing the atmosphere of an era when men fought savage battles in *and* around water filled trenches amongst the stinking litter of war.

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Cyril Demarne

A truly excellent account a story told from the heart with the unassailable authority of was who was there.

THIS ENGLAND

Prior to September 1939, Cyril Demarne had been fighting fires in the East End of London for fourteen years. On the outbreak of war he became one of the nucleus of professional men comparing man of the Auxiliary Fire Service for the maelstrom of the Blitz. A gifted writer, Cyril has set down their trials, their endeavours and their sacrifices now enshrined in the Fireman's Memorial, unveiled by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother in May 1991. The memorial bears the names of 1,027 men and women of the Fire Service who died as the result of enemy action in the United Kingdom. Their names are also recorded in the Roll of Honour in this book.

This is a true story, told by a fireman in a way that only a fireman who experienced the horrors of the Blitz could tell it. It is a story of ordinary men and women in extraordinary circumstances who, with fortitude and great courage, became very far from ordinary. To them, this book is dedicated.

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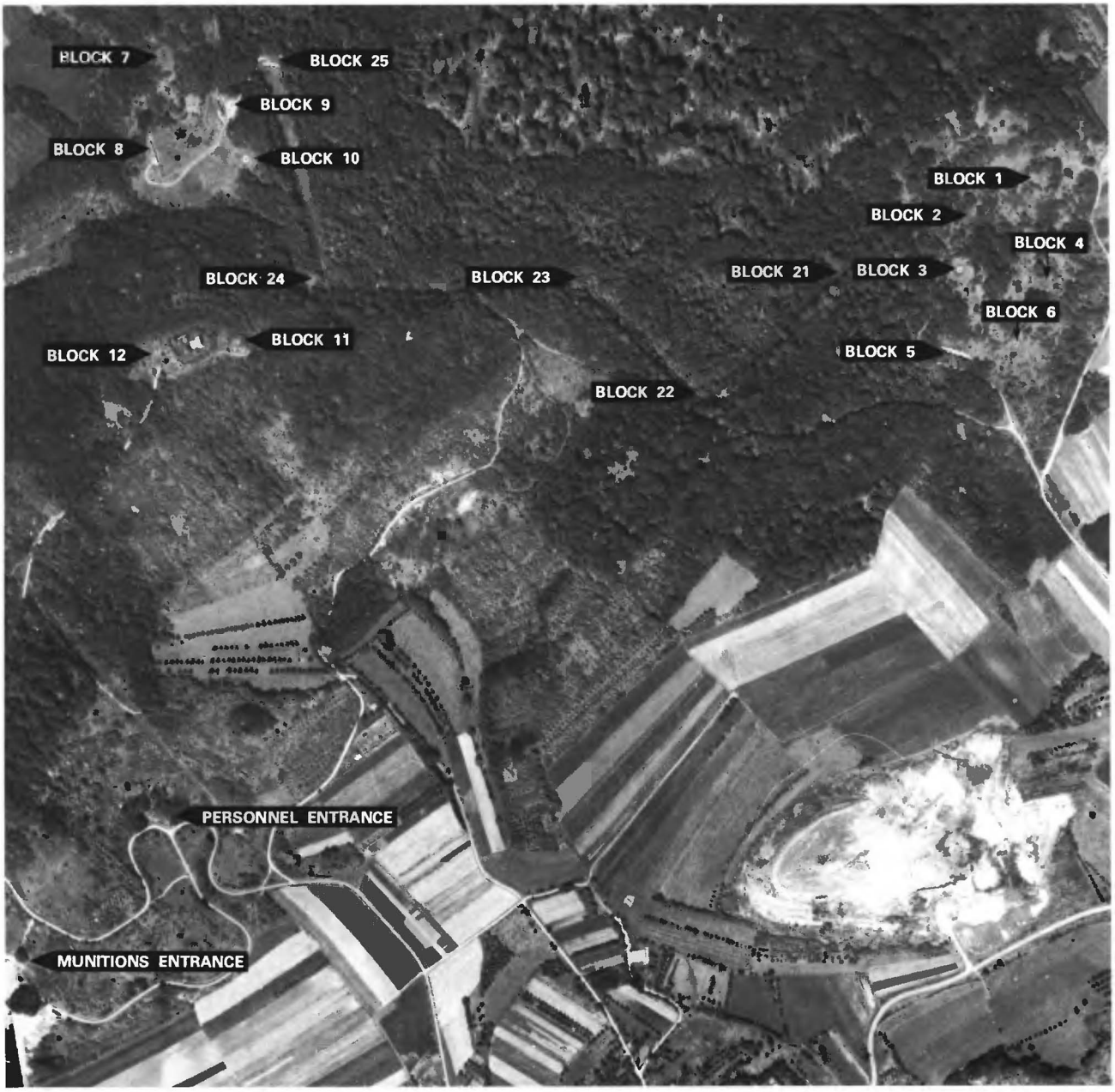
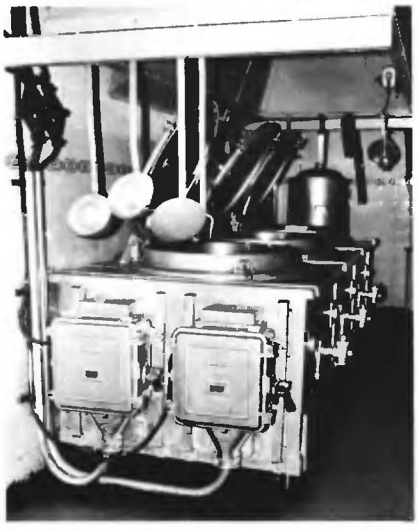
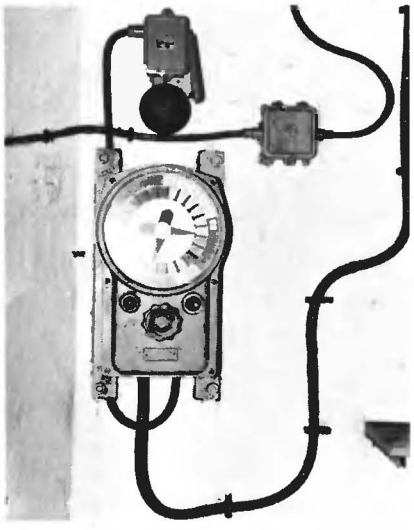






More illustration of the excellent state of preservation of Hackenberg — the galley, neatly maintained (*left*), and an order telegraph, pictured in Block 9.

Nature, over the years, has covered Hackenberg well with a cloak of trees, hiding most of the details of the blocks; the eastern end of the W-shaped anti-tank ditch having almost completely disappeared under the foliage. Those blocks open to visitors, numbers eight and nine, are kept clear of undergrowth, leaving them clearly visible at the top left-hand corner. (IGN)

shelling in 1944. Returning underground and travelling by lift down to the light railway, it is back to the rear of the fortress and the exit to the outside world.

The fortress is open to visitors on Saturdays and Sundays between April 1 and October 31, from 2.00 p.m. to 3.00 p.m.

Visits can be arranged at other times during the year for parties of at least thirty people; application to be made about ten days beforehand — telephone 82 91 30 08.

Admission 18 francs, but reductions may be made for parties.

Postcards and a very interesting brochure produced by Amifort which tells all about the fortress, 'the largest of the Maginot Line', are obtainable at the entrance.

BAMBESCH

One of the five minor fortresses of the Faulquemont Fortified Sector, the Bambesch fortress (A35) stands just south of the N3 from which it is visible, a few kilometres north of the village of Bambiderstroff and about ten kilometres west of Saint-Avold.

The Faulquemont sector was responsible for the frontier from Coume, five kilometres north-east of Boulay, to Kerbach, north-west of Sarreguemines. The western part of the sector was protected by five minor fortresses and eight casemates, from that at Kerfent (A34) to that at Tetting (A38), in the centre; the rest of the sector relied on flooding for its protection, with cover from a hundred or so blockhouses. Bambesch was the second fortress from the left.

The Bambesch fortress had three battle blocks:

Block 1: one MI turret and one GFM cupola.
Block 2: one 47mm AT/Reibel JM embrasure, one Reibel JM embrasure, one GFM cupola and one LG cupola.
Block 3: one 47mm AT/Reibel JM embrasure, one Reibel JM embrasure and two GFM cupolas.

In 1940 the fortress was under the command of Lieutenant André Pastre and the battle crew consisted of 2 officers and 121 men of the 156ème RIF.

Until the end of May 1940 the Faulquemont Fortified Sector was under the XXème Corps d'Armée of the 4ème Armée. With the withdrawal of the army staff, the 3ème Armée had taken over.

At the end of May German patrols made contact with the advance posts but nothing significant occurred before the night of June 13, when in accordance with the orders for a general withdrawal, the interval troops and part of the fortress's infantry began to pull out. Commandant Adolphe Denoix, who established his command post in the Laudrefang fortress, then assumed command of those who remained in the Faulquemont sector's fortifications, who were to cover the withdrawal until their turn came on the night of June 17. On the 15th the casemate garrisons concentrated in the fortress as planned but the next phase of the withdrawal could not be carried out as German troops were soon on the ridge to the rear of the fortress line. These were the first elements of 167. Infanterie-Division which had turned the line after the breakthrough in the Sarre and moved behind the fortifications. In next to no time the Germans had discovered Bambesch's Achilles' heel: with its rear at the edge of a dense wood, the fortress could be easily approached. They had no difficulty in bringing their artillery batteries forward, among them 88mm Flak, in a direct line of fire behind the fortress. The attack started on June 20. Lieutenant Pastre knew that

Above: **This is the view of Bambesch fortress presented to visitors as they approach the fort today. The shell damage to the face of the block is still very much evident, as is the armoured searchlight mounted on the wall (left).** *Below:* **The hailstorm of fire directed at Bambesch by the German gunners graphically displayed for a modern-day visitor on this GFM cupola — note the unexploded round embedded below the observation slit. (ECP Armées)**

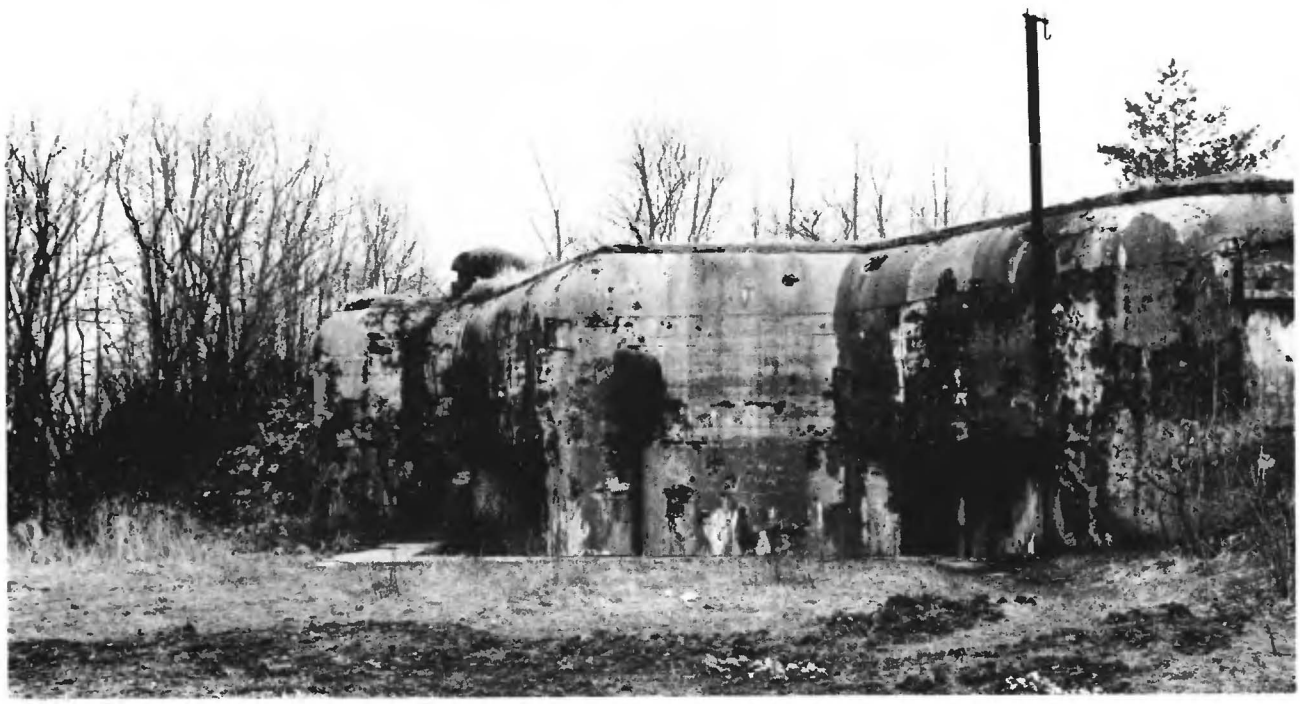
Above: **The victors of Bambesch and Kerfent, officers from Infanterie-Regiment 339, inspect Block 3 at Kerfent. Oberleutnant Schmidt stands right with Major Josef Gollé (second from right).** *Right:* **The potent 88mm Flak gun, one of the most versatile German weapons of the war, was the main instrument in the capture of Bambesch and Kerfent as the damage to the cupola in the middle picture illustrates. (See also page 9). (M. Heiden via R. Bruge)**

The commander of the 4ème Armée, General Edouard Requin, leads Canadian visitors through the barbed wire defences by Block 2 at Kerfent fortress. Our May 1987 comparison shows just how much the forest has reclaimed the land; the village of Boucheporn, visible at the top right in 1939, is now completely hidden to view. (ECP Armées)

Above: **Kerfent fortress personnel are presented to the Canadian Governor General, M. T. A. Crerar, by Général Requin.** *Below:* **No flags out when we took this comparison in 1987 — only the wind whistling on the empty and forgotten Block 2. (ECP Armées)**

Bambesch was beyond the range of both Enseling and Laudrefang but requested supporting fire nonetheless, which came from their machine guns and 81mm mortars respectively. After two hours of intense shelling, 88mm shells managed to breach Block 2 and forced the crew to abandon it. Meanwhile, the air inside the fortress had become more and more polluted; aware of what had happened to the men at La Ferté, Lieutenant Pastre discussed the situation with his NCOs and on the afternoon of June 20 they decided to surrender to an assault troop of Infanterie-Regiment 339.

The infantry regiment's commander, Oberstleutnant Reisner von Lichtenstern, was killed the following day whilst making preparations for an attack on Kerfent. This surrendered after intense shelling, an 88mm Flak being brought up to within about a hundred metres of Block 2. Einseling, Laudrefang and Teting held out against four days of heavy shelling and renewed attacks which were defeated thanks to the support of Laudrefang's 81mm mortars. These, the last three fortresses of the Faulquemont sector, surrendered on June 30 after the sector commander, Commandant Denoix, had met Colonel Marion and put his signature to the document drawn up at the headquarters of Höheres Kommando z.b.V. XXXXV.



Left: **Men of Infanterie-Regiment 339 set up a machine gun in a ditch beside the forest by Block 2, opening fire on its embrasures with an MG 34 — the standard infantry Light Machine Gun at this time.** *Right:* **Unlike the well-preserved battle blocks at Kerfent, the lightly constructed barrack blocks which lined the access road have practically disappeared, their positions being marked by their foundations, themselves hidden under the bushes and weeds. (M. Heiden via R. Bruge)**

The fort was purchased by the town of Bambiderstroff and has been open to the public since 1973, the local fire brigade running this side of things. Visits begin at Block 3, which was also the entrance block, where there is much to be seen, including the firing chamber. On the way down to the main thoroughfare (132 steps), you are shown the kitchen. Then, upon reaching Block 1, you go up the steps (105 of them) to the battle chambers, where you can see inside the M1 turret and the GFM cupola. Walking down to the thoroughfare, you are shown the infirmary, the sleeping quarters, the 212-metre-deep well and various weapons and other items displayed in a museum. Upon reaching Block 2, after ascending the 137 steps to the firing chamber, one is able to inspect the damage sustained by this part of the fortress during the battle in June 1940. Leaving the block, you can see the superstructures and, on your way back to the entrance, through the woods, the turret and cupola of Block 2 from the outside.

Bambesch is open on certain Sundays and holidays from April to September, from 1.00 p.m. to 6.00 p.m. These opening days change from one year to another, and it is wise to inquire by telephoning 87 90 31 95. Visits of parties of twenty or so can always be arranged for any time — same telephone number. Admission 15 francs, but reductions may be made for parties. A small brochure telling the story of the fort is on sale.

The battle is lost. Convinced that German troops had entered Block 3 after the French garrison were forced to evacuate it, due to the concentrated German artillery fire, and then having to watch Block 2 suffer the same fate, Capitaine Broché had to decide to surrender the fortress. Sergent Chef Valentin emerges from Block 2, his gas mask hanging from his neck and his eyes blinking in the daylight, ready to be taken prisoner. (M. Heiden via R. Bruge)

Left: **Kerfent's garrison is led away to captivity in front of the badly damaged Block 2, still smoking from the battle, June 21, 1940. The cupola on top of the left-hand end of the block is the same badly damaged one shown on page 9.** *Right:* **The Kerfent fortress commander, Capitaine Georges Broché (carrying coat over his arm), is saluted by one of his men as he walks away from his command. The Germans have wasted no time in setting up an 88mm Flak gun in the foreground, to fire on the Mottenberg fortress, a few kilometres to the north-west. (M. Heiden via R. Bruge)**

Although the end of the war was still five months away when these members of the 44th Infantry Division were pictured inspecting the personnel entrance to Simserhof on December 20, 1944, they could be considered the first tourists to visit the fortress. (US Army) *Below:* **Simserhof remains relatively unchanged in 1987.**

SIMSERHOF

One of the two major fortresses of the Rohrbach Fortified Sector, Simserhof is about six kilometres west of Bitche between the D35 and D35A.

The Rohrbach Fortified Sector was responsible for the frontier from Obergailbach, ten kilometres east of Sarreguemines, to Volmunster, about fifteen kilometres north of Bitche. This sector was protected by two major fortresses, three minor fortresses and twenty casemates, stretching from the minor fortress of Welschoff, to the west, to another minor fortress, Otterbiel, to the east. There were also eight shelters. Simserhof was the middle one of the sector's five fortresses.

The Simserhof fortress had eight battle blocks and the usual two entrance blocks:

Block 1: one 135mm mortar embrasure, one 47mm AT/Reibel JM embrasure, one Reibel JM embrasure, one MI turret and one GFM cupola.

Block 2: one 47mm AT/Reibel JM embrasure, one Reibel JM embrasure, one 81mm turret, one GFM cupola and one observation cupola.

Block 3: one 37mm AT/Reibel JM embrasure, one Reibel JM embrasure, one 81mm turret and two GFM cupolas.

Block 4: one 135mm mortar embrasure, one 37mm AT/Reibel JM embrasure, one Reibel JM embrasure, one MI turret and one GFM cupola.

Block 5: three 75mm howitzer embrasures, two GFM cupolas, one LG cupola and observation cupola.

Block 6: three 75mm howitzer embrasures, two GFM cupolas, one LG cupola and observation cupola.

Block 7: one 135mm turret and two GFM cupolas.

Block 8: one 75mm turret and two GFM cupolas.

The ammunition and supplies entrance was of the direct-entry kind; the personnel entrance via a stairwell. The former was armed with one 47mm AT/Reibel JM embrasure and two GFM cupolas, the latter with two 47mm AT/Reibel JM embrasures, two GFM cupolas and one LG cupola.

In June 1940 the fortress was commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Raoul Bonlarron and manned by 28 officers and 792 men of the 153ème RIF and 150ème RAP.

The crew had 'boarded' the fortress just eight days before war broke out but the following months of the 'drôle de guerre' ('phoney war' to the British) were uneventful except for some salvoes fired in January by the 75mm turret of Block 8 and occasional visits, the most notable being on January 18 when a large party from the staff of VIIIème Corps d'Armée visited the fortress. Lieutenant-Colonel Bonlarron took over Simserhof on April 26. There was no real change in the sector when the German armies broke through the front along the Meuse in May but the fortress was shelled from time to time, on May 13, 24 and 25, for instance. The VIIIème Corps d'Armée of the 5ème Armée had been in tactical command of the sector since September 1939, but this corps was transferred to the Aisne front at the beginning of June, and the XXXXIIIème Corps d'Armée de Forteresse took over.

On June 12, following the general withdrawal order issued by the 5ème Armée, the sector's interval troops began pulling out

while those in the fortresses and casemates remained as cover. On June 14 German pressure mounted on the advanced posts, particularly in the wooded area north of Bitche, and an attack against Gros-Rederching was repelled. The 75mm turret of Block 8 fired two salvoes of twenty shells each in the afternoon. In an order of the day circulated among the crew, Lieutenant-Colonel Bonlarron declared that 'the hour is grave for France, the hour is grave for Simserhof . . . we shall fight . . . take heart, even so!'

By June 15 all the interval troops had gone; the troops holding the fortifications were on their own. Lieutenant-Colonel Bonlarron assumed command of the entire sector. That morning the advanced posts were forced to start withdrawing to the main line and at Simserhof, which for most of the day had fired in support of them, there was all the general commotion of entering into battle.

After the 1. Armee breakthrough in the Sarre on June 15, Höheres Kommando z.b.V. XXXVII turned its attention to the fortresses flanking the breach to the east and attacked Haut-Poirier, a minor fortress west of the Rohrbach sector. A 150mm howitzer shelled its Block 3 from the rear until the shells broke through, killing three men inside and badly damaging the upper storey, and the fortress surrendered late on June 21. As the 257. Infanterie-Division and 262. Infanterie-Division advanced on the rear of the fortress line, guns of the latter division were brought to bear on the rear of Welschoff, now the westernmost fortress east of the German breakthrough. Soon the shells were coming straight at its Block 1 and the casemate at Bining. The barrages fired in support of the fortifications by the Simserhof 75mm howitzers could not provide much help, for the guns were firing at the extreme limit of their range — Welschoff being within reach only with a favourable wind. From June 17, when a barrage from the 75mm embrasures of Block 5 landed close enough to drive off the gunners from a 150mm howitzer which had started to pound Welschoff from Singling, Simserhof kept up supporting fire day and night. But late on June 23 the German batteries had managed to pierce Welschoff's Block 1, and the following day the fortress surrendered.

On June 21 the howitzers of Block 5 called a halt to the efforts of those Germans at Rohrbach who had brought up three 37mm anti-tank guns in front of that small fortress. Rohrbach was in sight of the Simserhof

Above: **An infantryman from the 71st Infantry Regiment, 44th Infantry Division contemplates an observation cupola astride Block 5 at Simserhof, December 19, 1944. (US Army) Our comparison *below*, of April 1987 shows how only grass and weeds have reclaimed the shell-torn earth, the concrete of the fortress itself being too near the surface to support any trees.**

Meanwhile, his buddies (*left*) inspect the handiwork of their artillery in the shell-ravaged facade of Block 5. (US Army) *Right:* Seemingly unchanged today, when our author Jean Paul Pallud visited the site in April 1987, a closer scrutiny revealed how the major damage had been repaired by the French Army after the removal of the armament.

observation posts and within precise range of its guns and, thanks to its support, the fortress was not taken before the armistice, the Germans being unable to bring their guns up close enough.

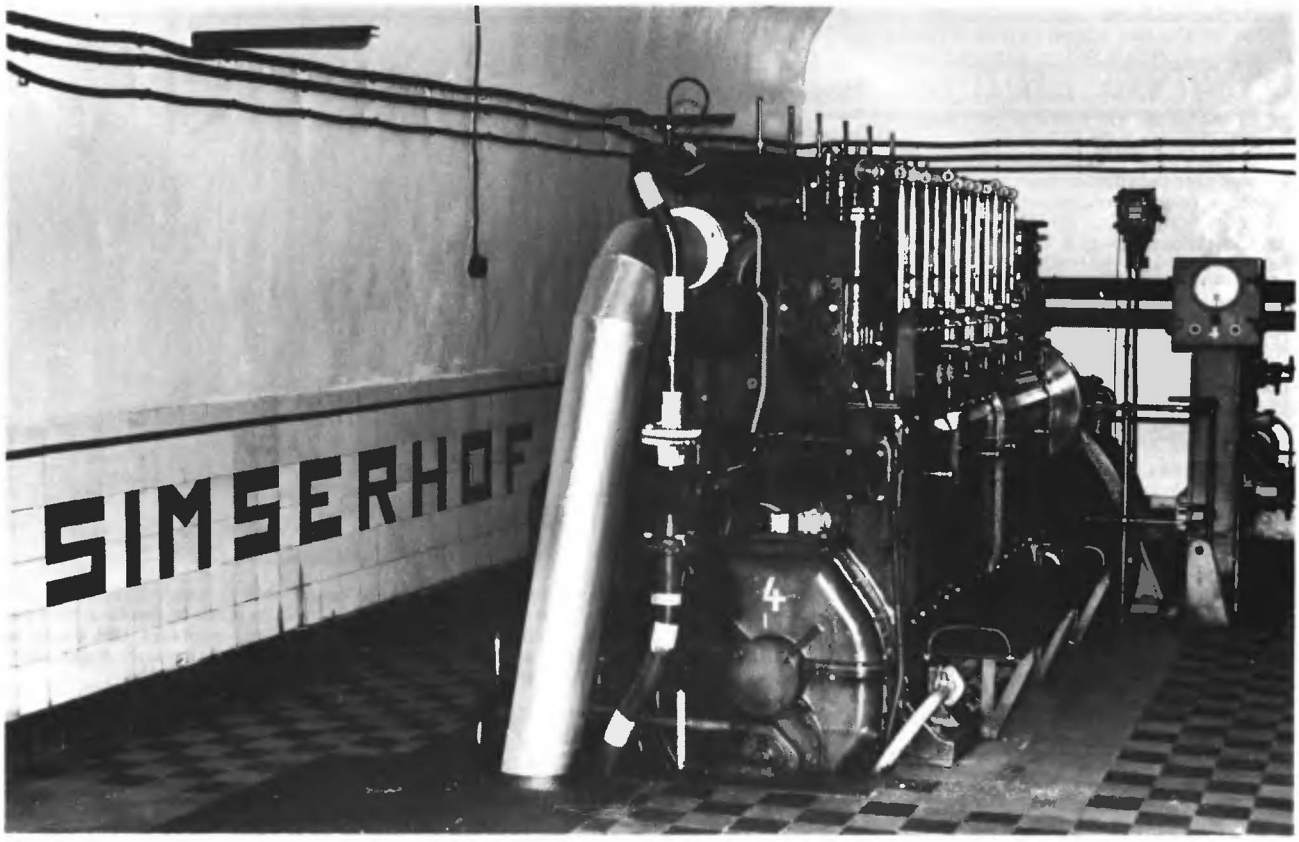
Late on June 24 the radio announced that the armistice was signed, Simserhof fired a last salvo in support of Rohrbach and the armistice brought all firing to an end at 12.35 a.m. on June 25. Simserhof had fired about 30.000 shells of all calibres since war was declared.

Five days later, the Rohrbach sector commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Bonlarron, and the Vosges sector commander, Commandant Pierre Fabre, were taken to the Grand-Hohékirkel fortress to meet the French High Command's envoy Lieutenant-Colonel Jacques Simon, who had been driven there after a meeting with the 257. Infanterie-Division commander, Generalleutant Max von Viebahn. Lieutenant-Colonel Simon informed the two sector commanders that the fortifications were to be surrendered without being sabotaged and that their men were to be considered as prisoners-of-war. Immensely angry at the ignominy of this denial of the surrender terms and only after much protest did the two commanders agree to sign the necessary documents, and they went so far as to make their feelings known in the comments they added to them. Commandant Fabre was so clearly hostile that the Germans, suspecting that he might disobey orders and have the fortresses destroyed, discreetly kept an eye on him just in case.

After having planned to incorporate Simserhof in their own Siegfried Line, the Germans cancelled the project. They then started to take equipment away — for example, two Sulzer 175 KVA generators found their way to the Atlantic Wall — and used the fortress to store ammunition and torpedoes. In December 1944 the US 100th Infantry Division forced the German defences which made use of the Maginot Line, and in the course of these battles the American heavy artillery badly damaged Blocks 1, 5 and 6 at Simserhof. The Germans added to the damage in carrying out demolitions before withdrawing and the Americans did the same when they in turn had to withdraw as the 559. Volks-Grenadier-Division advanced in January 1945 when the Germans launched their 'Nordwind' counter-offensive. The American contribution damaged most of the blocks and both entrances, and the cupolas on Blocks 7 and 8.

The 135mm turret of Block 7 at Simserhof as it appeared in 1969. The two heavy mortars are depressed at their lowest angle. (ECP Armées)

Above: **The MI turret of Block 4 and (*below*) a GFM cupola of Block 6 as they are today, basking in the spring sunshine in 1987. Traces of the original camouflage paint scheme are still discernible on the steel monsters.**



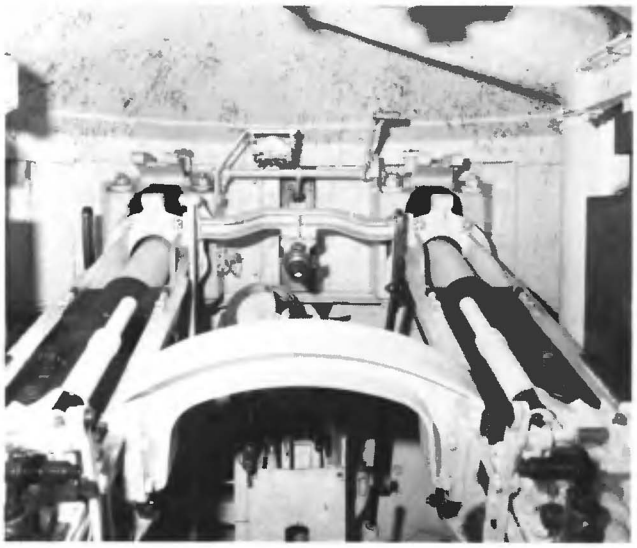
One of the four 290 HP Sulzer generators of Simserhof power-house as seen by the author in 1987.

The French Army, which repaired all the damage in the early fifties, is still the owner of Simserhof. Unlike most of the other disused fortresses, Simserhof was kept on by the Army, which continued to maintain the place and created a superb Maginot Line museum there. A large artillery collection includes all the guns of the Maginot Line, others from French and German fortifications of the 1870–1914 period, plus various other French and German types. Shells on display include 75mm, 81mm and 135mm from the Maginot fortresses and huge French 400mm and 370mm of the First World War. Also to be seen are optical devices and wireless transmitters (French and German) . . . generators . . . and a variety of cupolas, from the Renault FT 17 turrets which were converted into observatories to the Pamart cupolas of the modernised Verdun fortresses. Visits to the fortress are organised by the enthusiasts association Association des Amis du Simserhof.

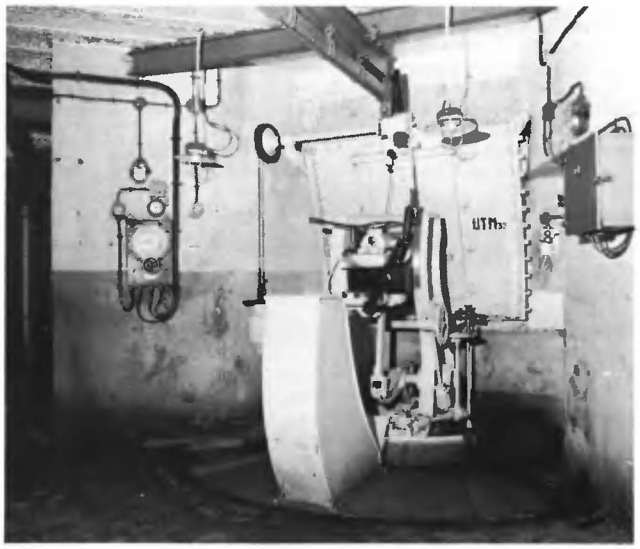
The guided tour begins at the ammunition and supplies entrance. You are conducted to the fortress's main ammunition magazine, M1, where the large museum collection is displayed. Boarding the light railway, you are then transported up to the battle blocks to visit either Block 6 or Block 8, where a lift takes you up. At Block 6 you can see the three 75mm howitzer embrasures and the cupolas, from both inside the block and from outside after leaving by the emergency exit. If you go to Block 8, you can see the block only from the inside but the 75mm turret is shown to you 'in action' and, after the lift takes you down to the gallery level, you are able to inspect the fortress's command post. The light railway then takes you back to the rear for a tour of the sleeping quarters, kitchen and power-house, before your return to the personnel entrance and the outside world.

The excellent Simserhof fortress is open every day except for Monday, from mid-March to mid-December, but applications must be made about ten days beforehand — telephone 87 96 14 55.

Admission is 20 francs; group reductions may apply.



Left: **Interior of the 75mm turret of Block 8 at Simserhof. This is a part of the complex to which public access is denied — the French Army having retained their ownership of the fortress.**



Right: **A 135mm heavy mortar in an embrasure at Block 4 — note the order telegraph mounted on the wall at left — see page 28. (ECP Armées)**

SCHOENENBOURG

One of the two major fortresses of the Haguenau Fortified Sector, Schoenenbourg is on the last heights before the Alsace plain between Wissembourg and Haguenau. It is about two kilometres north of the village of Schoenenbourg on the D263.

The Haguenau Fortified Sector was responsible for the frontier from the Climbach sector, a few kilometres west of Wissembourg, to Stattmatten, on the Rhine, about eighteen kilometres east of Haguenau. Its defences following the terrain at the juncture of the Vosges mountains and the Alsace plain, the sector's only two fortresses were on the left wing, on the final outcrop of high ground, the protection of the plain continuing eastwards across this area with thirty-nine casemates, a number of them built as couples. There were also fifteen shelters and two observatories. The huge Hochwald fortress — with its eleven battle blocks, three entrance blocks and nine casemates — was on the left wing of the sector, with Schoenenbourg a few kilometres to the east, the last fortress before the plain.

The Schoenenbourg fortress had six battle blocks and the usual two entrance blocks:

Block 1: one 47mm AT/Reibel JM embrasure, one Reibel JM embrasure and two GFM cupolas.
Block 2: one MI turret and one GFM cupola.
Block 3: one 75mm turret and one GFM cupola.
Block 4: one 75mm turret, one GFM cupola and one observation cupola.
Block 5: one 81mm turret, one GFM cupola and one LG cupola.
Block 6: one 47mm AT/Reibel JM embrasure, one Reibel JM embrasure and one GFM cupola.

The entrances were of the shaft kind. The armament of the ammunition and supplies entrance comprised one 47mm AT/Reibel JM embrasure and two GFM cupolas; the personnel entrance, one 47mm AT/Reibel JM embrasure, two GFM cupolas, one LG cupola and one observation cupola.

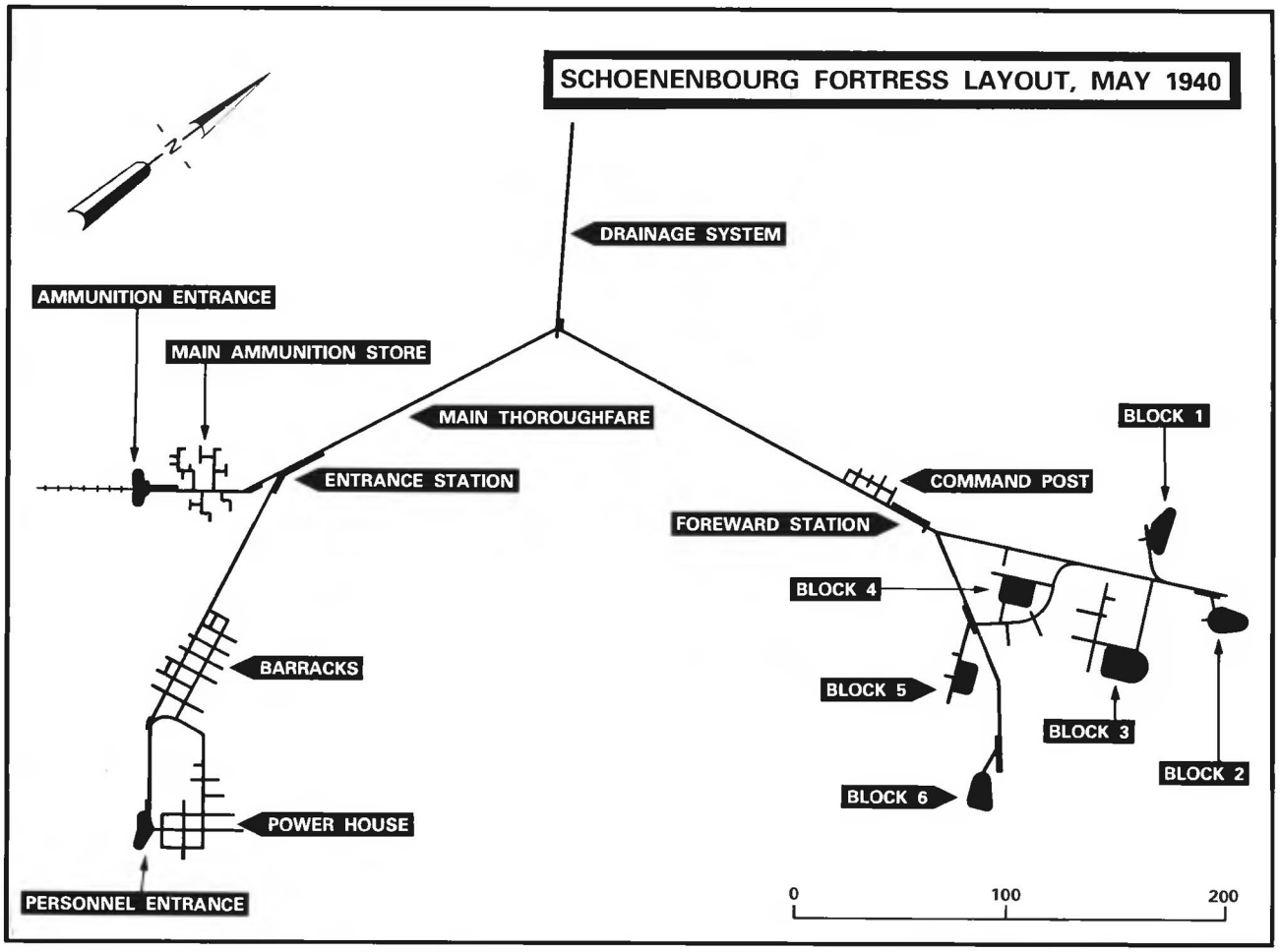
In May 1940 the Haguenau Fortified Sector was under the XIIème Corps d'Armée of the 5ème Armée and the Schoenenbourg fortress was under the command of Commandant Martial Reynier. The fortress battle crew was 20 officers and 610 men of the 22ème RIF and 156ème RAP. They had 'boarded' the fortress just ten days before war broke out and the 75mm turrets fired their first trial rounds, twenty shells per turret, on September 10. At the end of January 1940 it was the turn of the 81mm turret on Block 5 to test its mortars. In March a 120mm artillery section was brought forward to take up positions above the battle blocks, and gunners from the 81mm turret were sent to serve the two guns.

A patrol from the 246. Infanterie-Division advance cautiously through Salmbach, ten kilometres north-east of Schoenenbourg, on May 16, 1940. In spite of the fact that the village was almost out of range of the of the fortress's 75mm howitzers, this damage was inflicted during shelling of German troop movements through Salmbach. (Bundesarchiv) *Below:* **Just another sleepy French village in May 1987.**

The summit of Block 3 at Schoenenbourg in May, 1986, showing the GFM cupola and raised 75mm turret behind. (R. Jehl)

On May 14 the fortress fired its first rounds in anger, its 75mm howitzers aiming at German movements on either side of Wissembourg. The return fire was not long in coming, and during the evening a 280mm railway gun sent thirteen shells from Bundenthal, out of range of the fortress's guns. These caused no real damage; likewise the twenty shells that were fired on the afternoon of May 15, which smashed a few gaps in the anti-tank barrier of sunken railway lines and the barbed wire and left huge craters on top of the fortress. The 280mm having moved away to shell another target, a battery of 105mm howitzers had started shelling the fortress from the Wissembourg area on May 16, but these German gunners soon learnt how suicidal it was to attempt this within range of the fortress's guns.

German shelling lessened in the days that followed and the 75mm turrets were occasionally turned to fire at a Henschel 126 spotter aircraft which droned over the fortress. Although such a rôle had never been



contemplated for these turrets — and anyway the chances of their hitting anything were almost nil — this sort of anti-aircaft fire was convincing enough to force an intruder away and was resorted to repeatedly by many of the fortresses in May and June. Shelling of the fortress resumed on May 26 with 150mm howitzers joining in, and one of the watch in a GFM cupola on Block 5 was killed when the cupola received a direct hit.

During the night of May 27 the fortress was resupplied with 8,000 rounds of 75mm. On June 4 one of the two 120mm guns on top of the fort was destroyed when a shell exploded prematurely in the barrel; eight gunners were wounded, one of them dying two days later from his wounds. On June 8 another two 120mm howitzers were brought forward near the entrances, making three guns in position outside the fortress. By June 13 the only one of these that was still capable of being fired was disabled when its carriage failed.

EN HOMMAGE AUX VALEUREUX
COMBATTANTS DU SECTEUR FORTIFIE
DE HAGUENAU LIVRES A
L'ADVERSAIRE LE 1ER JUILLET 1940
SANS AVOIR ETE VAINCUS

This plaque, set up in the entrance to the munitions block, commemorates the valour of the fortress crew, forced to surrender the unvanquished on July 1, 1940.

On June 12, following the general withdrawal order issued to the 5ème Armée, the interval troops and part of the infantry in the fortress started pulling out. Lieutenant-Colonel Jacques Schwartz took command of the troops remaining in the fortresses and casemates of the Haguenau sector and established his command post in the Hochwald fortress. A few kilometres east of Schoenenbourg, on June 15, the 246. Infanterie-Division attacked in the Hoffen sector, and the fortress's 75mm turrets fired for most of the day to stop them. The turrets were at it again the following day, and were to go on firing until June 24. As the expenditure of 75mm shells went on, the fortress commander sent out parties to recover supplies left behind in the depots when the interval troops had withdrawn.

Several groups of Stukas dive-bombed the battle blocks on June 20 but succeeded only in plastering the turrets with earth. Clearing-up took place during the night, and the 75mm turrets resumed firing at the German troops the next day. The Stukas came back at about 9.30 a.m., 11.15 a.m. and 6.30 p.m. on the 22nd and in the last of these raids managed to clear away most of the earth deposited on the 81mm turret in the previous ones! When the last of the Stukas departed, they had dropped about sixty heavy bombs on the fortress but achieved no great damage: a direct hit on Block 6 had caused some fissures and brought a few chunks of concrete down on the staircase; another hit near Block 1 had twisted a Reibel JM mounting.

another had partially exposed Block 4, and another had blasted earth about a metre thick on to Block 5.

The heavy artillery of schwere Artillerie-Abteilung 800, which possessed two batteries of 420mm heavy mortars and one of 355mm howitzers, was brought in to deal with Schoenenbourg. The pounding began at about 4.15 p.m. on June 21, by a 355mm howitzer — 35.5cm Haubitze M.1 in German parlance — and a 420mm heavy mortar, this giant having been built by Skoda, one of the small number taken over from the Czechs — German designation 42cm Haubitze (t). The latter, which had been installed at Oberotterbach, just north of Wissembourg, opened up by lobbing fourteen one-ton shells at the fortress, and fired another such salvo at the same time on the 22nd. It was soon followed by the 355mm howitzer. For the 75mm turrets' protection, they were kept retracted while the heavy shells crashed outside, being brought into action cautiously as while they were elevating they came under direct fire from 88mm Flak and 105mm howitzers which the Germans had brought up. A hit scored by one of the howitzers on the Block 3 turret on June 21 threw up flames and fumes inside, and the damage, though small, was enough to prevent the turret from retracting fully, so a patrol was sent outside that night to cut away the obstructing piece of metal.

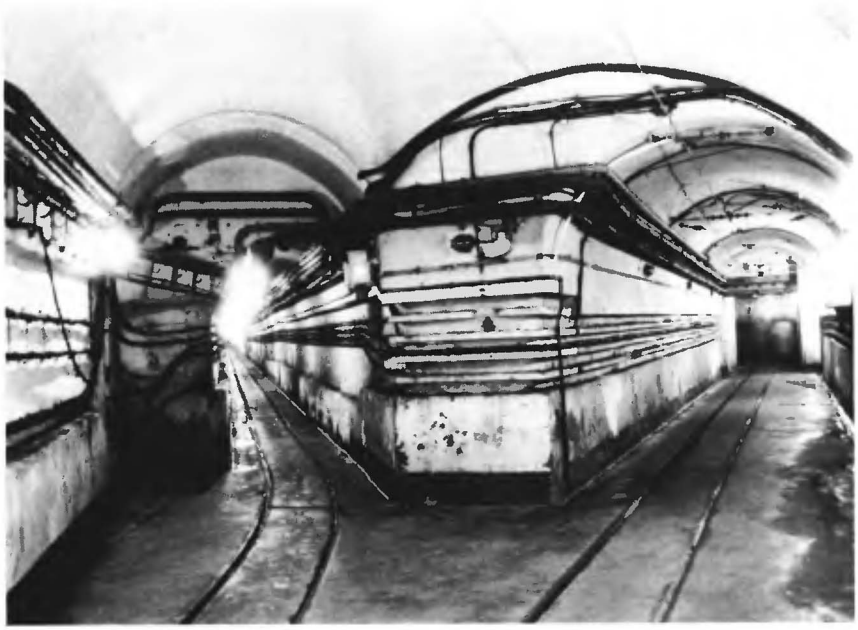
The 420mm resumed firing on the morning of June 23 with the usual fourteen-shell salvo, and fired another salvo in the evening. Block 3 was hit by one of these great concrete-busters — a few cracks appearing inside but nothing worse. Things were more serious for the 81mm turret of Block 5 as it was hit when firing and could not be fully retracted.

Schoenenbourg fired again at German concentrations on June 24 but its turrets immediately came under violent counter-fire from the batteries of 105mm and 150mm howitzers. When the armistice brought all firing to an end, Schoenenbourg had fired 15,802 rounds of 75mm and 672 rounds of 81mm: more than eighty per cent of it between June 14 and the end.

The French High Command's envoy Lieutenant-Colonel Edouard Durieu du Souzy met the commander of the 246. Infanterie-Division, Generalleutant Erich Denecke, at his command post at Woerth on the morning of June 30. In the afternoon he was driven to the Hochwald fortress and passed on the stupefying news to Lieutenant-Colonel Schwartz that in surrendering his sector's fortifications he and his men were to be considered as prisoners-of-war. As Fabre and Bonlarron had done, he signed the surrender as ordered but added his own comments to the document, to the effect that 'We are laying down our arms solely on the order of the French Government and not under constraint from the troops surrounding us. Today, we still dispose of sufficient means to sustain a siege of several weeks. I have the honour to request the French Government to point out these facts, which it may not itself be aware of, to the German Government.'

The protests changed nothing and the undefeated garrison were to leave their fortress on July 1 for the prisoner-of-war cages.

The Germans occupied the fortress until the beginning of 1945 when they withdrew across the Rhine, blowing the two entrances. In the early fifties the French Army repaired the damage and the two entrances were rebuilt, the personnel entrance being considerably altered. As with most of the Maginot Line, the Army abandoned Schoenenbourg in 1967, ceasing all maintenance, but it was not until 1982 that the region's 'Friends of the Line', Association des Amis de la Ligne Maginot d'Alsace — ALMA — were allowed to save it.



Above: **The entrance station of the light railway at Schoenenbourg, looking back towards the munitions/supply entrance, and showing a couple of locomotives parked on the main line.** *Below:* **Taken further back from the far end of the station and also looking back, this view shows the gallery, left, leading to the personnel entrance; the right-hand gallery (the main thoroughfare) leads to the munitions entrance and stores. (R. Jehl)**

Visits, which last about two hours, begin at the personnel entrance. Having walked down the stairwell to the lower main level of the fortress, visitors are then shown the power-house and its four generators, the ventilation system with its 28 filters, the kitchens and the sleeping quarters. Walking along the gallery as the men used to do, visitors reach the main thoroughfare at the entrance station of the railway and follow the line in the direction of the battle blocks. Just before reaching the station at the 'forward' end of the thoroughfare, you are shown the fortress's command post and then visit an artillery block, either Block 3 or Block 4, where a 75mm turret can be seen 'in action'. Then comes Block 5 and a walk back along the main thoroughfare to the ammunition and supplies entrance and the stairs to the outside. The power-house is quite capable of producing the 600 Volts DC required for the light railway, and this will soon be running, once the power line for the system has been relaid in the near future, when visitors will be able to enjoy being transported along the full length of the main thoroughfare.

Schoenenbourg is open on the first Sunday of every month, 9.00 a.m. to 4.00 p.m., from March to December and on the public holidays that fall between (Easter Monday, May 1, Whit Sunday, the 14th of July, August 15 and November 11). Visits can always be arranged for parties of at least thirty on Saturdays and Mondays (except for the first ones of every month which are reserved for individuals). Applications to be made about ten days beforehand — telephone 88 54 70 78.

Admission is 15 francs; group reductions may apply. An interesting brochure produced by ALMA, telling you all about the fortress. can be purchased at the entrance.

ESCH CASEMATE

As the temperature and humidity of a fortress deep under the ground hardly constitute the most favourable atmosphere for the preservation of fragile exhibits, ALMA decided to establish a Maginot Line museum in a casemate about six kilometres south-east of Schoenenbourg.

The Esch casemate, one of the 39 casemates of the Haguenau sector, stands just north of the D28 on the eastern outskirts of Hatten. One of the oldest casemates in the area, it was completed in 1931. After the fighting of 1940, the casemate was occupied by the Germans and saw another period of fierce conflict early in 1945 when American soldiers fought off one of the German attacks which resulted from Operation 'Nordwind'.

When the city of Hatten, which owns the casemate, suggested in 1983 that ALMA set up a museum there, it was in a bad way, and three years of devoted work went into getting the place back into its original state and into locating the various fittings and items that were missing. Visitors can now see a part of it in the way it was in 1940: the sleeping quarters, the ventilation system, the generator, a cupola, the Reibel JM embrasure machine guns, a 37mm anti-tank gun. . . . The other part has been arranged as a museum, with documents and photographs on display, plus detailed models and weapons and equipment.

The Esch casemate is open from May to September, every Sunday from 10.00 a.m. to midday and from 1.30 p.m. to 6.00 p.m.

MARCKOLSHEIM SOUTH CASEMATE

The Colmar Fortified Sector was responsible for the defence of the Rhine from Erstein, about twenty kilometres south of Strasbourg, to Blodelsheim, twenty kilometres north-east of Mulhouse. In March 1940 the Colmar sector was reorganised and became the 104ème Division d'Infanterie de Forteresse; from the end of May it was under the XIIIème Corps d'Armée of the 8ème Armée.

The 104ème Division d'Infanterie de Forteresse held the Rhine frontier from Diebolsheim (north-east of Sélestat) to Geiswasser (south of Neuf-Brisach). From left to right the regiments along this part of the frontier were the 242ème RI, 42ème RIF and 28ème RIF. The village of Marckolsheim, about twenty kilometres north-east of Colmar, stands more or less in the centre of what was the front line held by the first battalion of the 42ème RIF.

The 246. Infanterie-Division launched a potent attack upon the casemates of Hoffen Aschbach and Oberroedern on June 20. 88mm Flak guns and 37mm Pak guns fired at the casemates from point-blank range, and Stukas pounded them in the afternoon. Subsequent attacks by German infantry were repulsed by the stunned defences with artillery support from the 75mm and 135mm turrets of the Hochweld fortress. At Oberroedern, where this battered GFM cupola was pictured, eighteen dead German engineers were found scattered around the casemates, being buried by the French defenders. This cupola is quite possibly the one in which Sergent Delsart was killed, when the cupola suffered a direct hit from an 88mm shell which came in through an episcope, bursting inside the dome.

Casemate No. 35/3 (35th casemate, third line of defence) stands by the D424, a few hundred metres east of Marckolsheim, and another few hundred metres north was Casemate No. 34/3. The CORF-built fortifications on this part of the front consisted of 53 casemates and 14 infantry support shelters, which only took care of the weakest points along the Rhine. These defences were organised three lines deep from the river bank and were known as the 'Village Line' after the villages lining the main road running through them. After the CORF budget had been spent, long stretches of the front still lay undefended; to help fill the gaps, work was hastily begun on a host of blockhouses ('Block Garchery' after the 8ème Armée commander), many of which had yet to be completed when the Germans attacked here in 1940, launching Operation 'Kleiner Bär' (Little Bear).

Casemate No. 35/3 was opened in 1971 as a memorial to the men and machinery of the Rhine sector of the Maginot Line. (A. Pulicano)

This operation was moved forward a day, to June 15, when the Germans realised that the French were withdrawing in order to establish new defences on the crest of the Vosges as the 1. Armee attacked in force in the Sarre. The XXVII. Armeekorps of 7. Armee, with two divisions in the first wave, played the main rôle but on its left flank the 239. Infanterie-Division was also involved. The German assault troops started across the Rhine at about 9.10 a.m. after ten minutes of fierce shelling, 88mm Flak guns having been concealed on the river bank to knock out the French fortifications over on the opposite side.

The 218. Infanterie-Division forced a crossing near Schoenau, where the casemates of the first line held fast and stopped them, but the line was breached to the south and by evening the division had obtained a bridgehead about six kilometres wide and three kilometres deep. To the south, just opposite Marckolsheim, the 221. Infanterie-Division forced its way across the river either side of Sponeck and as early as 11.00 a.m. the engineers had started to erect a bridge at Limbourg, at a spot where the river was only about 200 metres across. That night, the bridgehead was eleven kilometres wide and about two kilometres deep. On the corps' left flank, the 239. Infanterie-Division crossed the river near Breisach but met stiff opposition: the French launched three counter-attacks in the afternoon and might have succeeded in pushing the Germans into the Rhine if only their forces had been just a

bit stronger. The situation at the end of the day did not look good for the 239. Infanterie-Division, whose bridgehead was only four kilometres wide and 500 metres deep, while the 221. Infanterie-Division was still three kilometres away.

Advance elements of the I. Bataillon of Infanterie-Regiment 360 of the 221. Infanterie-Division approached Marckolsheim on the afternoon of June 15 but dug in for the night after a few thrusts to probe the French positions. During the night 88mm Flak guns were brought across the river and manhandled into position. Early next morning Stukas attacked and bombed the casemates at Marckolsheim. One 88mm Flak opened fire against 'Blockhaus 703' — the name on the German maps for Casemate No. 35/3 — and scored a few direct hits on the observation cupola before French machine gun fire forced the German gunners to take cover. The Stukas bombed the casemates again in the afternoon. With the AM cupola buried under a layer of earth thrown up by the Stukas' bombs and the GFM cupola disabled by the '88', the casemate was blind. German engineers then managed to reach the superstructure and threw several explosive charges down into the casemate. Driven out by the explosions and the smoke which soon filled the interior, the occupants opened the door and, with their gas masks covering their faces, made a dash for Casemate No. 34/3. A few machine gun bursts put paid to that and they were taken prisoner. Their commander, Lieutenant André Marois, refused to get on the telephone to his comrades in 'Blockhaus 702' — Casemate No. 34/3 — to suggest that they surrender; meanwhile, from there, they had launched an unsuccessful counter-attack in an attempt to relieve Casemate No. 35/3, although managing to get their machine gun into position at the very edge of the D424, about a hundred metres further towards to the north.

On the morning of June 17, with the corps commander himself, General Alfred Wäger, looking on from the vicinity of the captured 'Blockhaus 703', the attack on 'Blockhaus 702' resumed. A number of 88mm Flak and 37mm Pak were firing straight at the casemate, which stubbornly returned fire until all embrasures and cupolas had been smashed. A battery of 150mm entered the scene and the casemate was soon smoking badly. Led by the casemate commander, Adjudant-Chef Raymond Guilbot, a party rushed outside to try to drive the German engineers away from the casemate but they were forced back, half of them being killed, Guilbot included. The engineers managed to climb onto the roof and dropped charges down but 'Blockhaus 702' still refused to surrender. More and more charges were dropped inside until the door opened and the occupants emerged, stumbling from the smoke-filled casemate. Only three men were unscathed. The casemate was completely wrecked, everything within was alight and ammunition was exploding in the heat. . . . The capture of Marckolsheim was soon to follow. Leutnant Krockzek and Leutnant Bouclier of Inf.Rgt. 360 were both awarded the Iron Cross First Class, Krockzek for the capture of Casemate No. 35/3, Bouclier for No. 34/3.

THE MARCKOLSHEIM MEMORIAL

Based around Casemate No. 35/3, a memorial museum was opened in 1971 on the initiative of the 42ème RIF and 28ème RIF old comrades associations, the project receiving the full support of the city of Marckolsheim.

Casemate No. 35/3 was a late CORF double casemate, being similar to an infantry block in a large fortress but without any links with its neighbours, and having its own power plant and ventilation system. Like most of the casemates in the Rhine valley where the water table was too high, it had only one storey. The armament of this double casemate consisted of two 47mm AT/Reibel JM embrasures, two Reibel JM embrasures, two light machine gun embrasures, one GFM cupola and one AM cupola.

Representative of the latter part of the war on display at the Marckolscheim Memorial: an M8 armoured car in the markings of the 2ème Division Blindée and a German-used Soviet 152mm KH 433/1(r) howitzer (*above*) and an M3 half-track as employed by the 1ème Division Française Libre. (A. Pulicano)

A visit takes in both parts of the casemate: the 'battle' areas (the two cupolas, the two firing chambers with the machine guns and anti-tank guns and their embrasures, the command post and the ammunition magazines) and the service areas (fuel storage, electricty generators, ventilation equipment).

You can have a good look at a GFM cupola as there is one on display in front of the memorial museum. It was salvaged from another casemate knocked out by the Germans near Kunheim, a few kilometres to the south, in 1945.

Outside are also to be seen relics from later in the war. The 152mm howitzer which stands just in front of the casemate is 'genuinely local' as it was found in a barn near Mulhouse in 1945 — of Soviet manufacture, large numbers of these guns were captured by the Germans and taken into service under the designation 15.2cm KH 433/1(r), the (r) standing for Russian. It is seen as a memorial to the 130,000 'malgré nous', Alsacians and Lorrainers impressed into the Werhmacht, to serve in an army which they refused to regard as their own.

There is also a Sherman which bears the nickname 'Hartmannswillerkopf — a tank that belonged to the 501ème RCC of the 2ème Division Blindée and that fought at Marckolsheim on January 31, 1945. This was donated by the French Army in 1975; though as to the veracity of its antecedents, your guess is as good as mine. The same applies to an M8 armoured car said to have been with the 2ème Division Blindée, which arrived around 1977 and also came from the French Army, and to an M3 half-track which arrived about a year later and is said to have seen service in Alsace with the 1ère Division Française Libre. Be that as it may, the types were certainly committed in Alsace in 1945 and, as such, serve as fitting exhibits in calling to mind the liberation.

Open 9.00-12.00 a.m. and 2.00-6.00 p.m. daily from June 15 to September 15, Sundays and holidays included; Sundays and holidays only from March 15 to June 14 and from September 16 to October 31.

Admission is only a few francs. A booklet is on sale outlining the story of the crossing of the Rhine in June 1940 and the liberation of Marckolsheim in January 1945.

THE FATE OF A WHITLEY

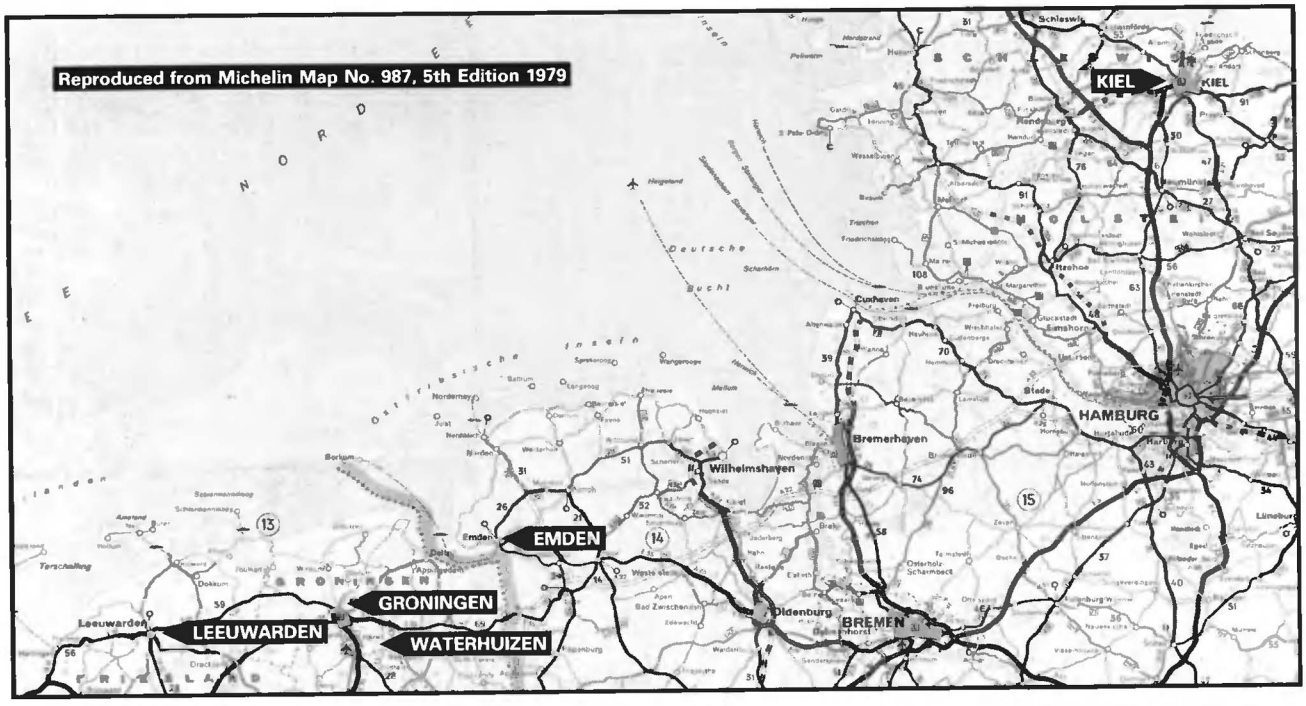
BY J. C. MAARSCHALKERWEERD

'Enemy coast ahead': that immortal cliché of Bomber Command, when heard over the intercom by the crew of an aircraft after a long haul over the North Sea from England, referred as often as not to the flat outline of the Netherlands, across which lay Germany and then the way home.

T4145 GE-'P for Peter' was just one of the 49 Whitley bombers of No. 4 Group, out of more than 300 aircraft which left airfields in England to cross the North Sea for Germany on the night of April 7, 1941; one of the thousands of British (and later American) aircraft never to re-cross the Dutch coast for England — their wreckage strewn over the low-lying fields and polders of the Netherlands or the muddy bottom of the Zuider Zee . . .

April 1941 — another month and the Netherlands would enter its second year of Nazi occupation. It was not an easy time for us (it would become far worse) and there was not much we could do about it, though resistance had taken root and there would come a time when we made it clear to our German neighbours that we did not intend to take their uninvited presence for granted. That we had not been left alone to our fate we knew from the frequent sound of aero-engines in the night: the throb of British bombers, for those whose sleep it disturbed, a reminder of the war that Britain was waging with the night operations of the RAF. How long would the war go on? When — if ever — would the New Order be overthrown? Who, in the spring of 1941, could possibly have known? The Nazi-Soviet Pact was in force; Britain had been driven from the Continent, the French Army defeated. And who indeed at that time could have had any inkling of the number of Allied

Top: **The burnt-out remains of Whitley T4145's centre-section and port wing lie across Woortmans Dyke, alongside the Warmenhuizen–Westbroek road; note the proliferation of Luftwaffe personnel examining their handiwork.** *Above:* **Forty-five years later, our author, J. C. Maarschalkerweerd, discusses the events of yesteryear with Willy Muntinga, who helped with several of the photographs and eyewitness accounts. The scene at first glance appears unchanged, but a more detailed examination reveals that the ditch has been moved to the right a few feet and the trees replanted.**



bombers that would come down in the Netherlands en route to and from Germany, over whose capital Göring had promised his Führer that British aircraft would never fly.

As the RAF made their way over our country in the darkness, we could hear the heavy and accurate flak of the German defences streaming up towards them . . . and all too often we also heard, mingled with the throb of the bombers, the more high-pitched sound of a German night fighter, hunting for prey . . . and then perhaps a few bursts of machine gun fire, followed by an explosion somewhere above us or as the doomed aircraft hit the ground. Next day, if of course allowed to by the German guards, one could look over the sad remains of the crashed machine. Sometimes there were bodies still inside or lying nearby.

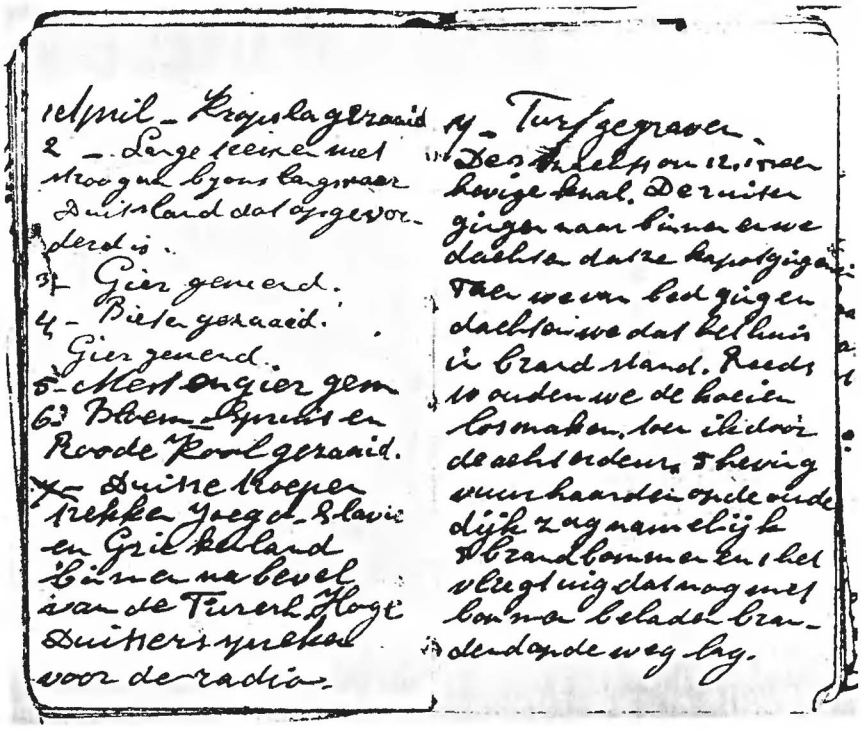
Between May 1940 and May 1945, when, after five years of foreign occupation, the war finally ended for us in the Netherlands, some 3,500 British and 2,000 American aircraft had come down on Dutch soil or into the waters of the Zuider Zee, or were claimed off the coast by the North Sea and the Wadden Zee. A thousand or so German aircraft came down as well. British medium and heavy bombers carried crews of between four and seven men; the German fighters between one and three. If the fighter crews survived being shot down over the Netherlands, they usually returned to their units to fight another day. The survivors of the bomber crews were destined for captivity, for only a few managed to evade capture: but for thousands of British and Commonwealth airmen the war ended, with their lives, in the Netherlands. Four of them were members of the five-man crew of the Whitley 'P for Peter' of No. 58 Squadron.

At 8.55 p.m. that night, with Pilot Officer Roy Carrapiett at the controls, the heavily laden bomber lifted off the runway at Linton-on-Ouse in Yorkshire bound for Germany. The major objective for the night's operations was Kiel, involving 320 aircraft in what was the largest raid to one target so far in the war. Twenty aircraft, including six Whitleys, one of which was T4145, attacked the secondary target of Emden.

Somewhere north of the city of Groningen, P Peter was intercepted by a Messerschmitt Bf 110 night fighter piloted by Oberfeldwebel Paul Gildner of 4/NJG 1 based at Leeuwarden. South-east of Groningen at 12.27 p.m. Dutch time, almost over the hamlet of Waterhuizen, the bomber exploded in mid-air and the burning fragments tumbled earthwards.

A local farmer, Mr Jan Aldershof, jotted down the events of that night in the diary he kept, written in an ordinary little notebook, in which he briefly recorded anything relevant about the daily round, and how the war impinged on things. The entry reads:

'April 7 — digging peat. During the night at 12.15 p.m. a big bang. The windows were blown open [inwards] and we were afraid that the glass would shatter. As we got out of bed we thought the whole house was on fire. We had already decided to set the cows free when through the back door I saw five large fires on the old dyke, namely five incendiaries and the aircraft, still laden with bombs, burning on the road. Other fragments were found all over the land next morning. German troops were not long in arriving, but there was not much they could do. Four men were dead and one came down by parachute in the "Made" [polder]. At daylight, a number of vehicles drove on and off the farm. It has been quite a busy day. A bomb landed a short distance from the Steens' house and made a large hole in the ground. Mr Oomkes had three of his pigs killed and his house damaged. Six or seven unexploded bombs are still on the land. This has been a night never to be forgotten. This is war!'



Extract from the diary of Jan Aldershof, a local farmer, which gives a very fresh and vivid insight into the sad demise of T4145 and its crew.

The remains of the Whitley, as Mr Aldershof noted, were scattered all over the area and, from photographs taken at the time, it would appear that, apart from minor wreckage, the aircraft broke up into five or six main segments. These photographs are from a wartime scrapbook that came to light in a street market a few years ago. It is remarkable how many such photographs were taken right through the war, mostly of course by German soldiers and officers. Often, extra prints were made and kept by the local studios or chemists to whom the films were brought to be developed. With the photographs as a reference and the assistance of a number of people, I was able to work out the spots in the Waterhuizen and Westerbroek area where segments of the Whitley fell and two of the bodies were found after the aircraft exploded in mid-air.

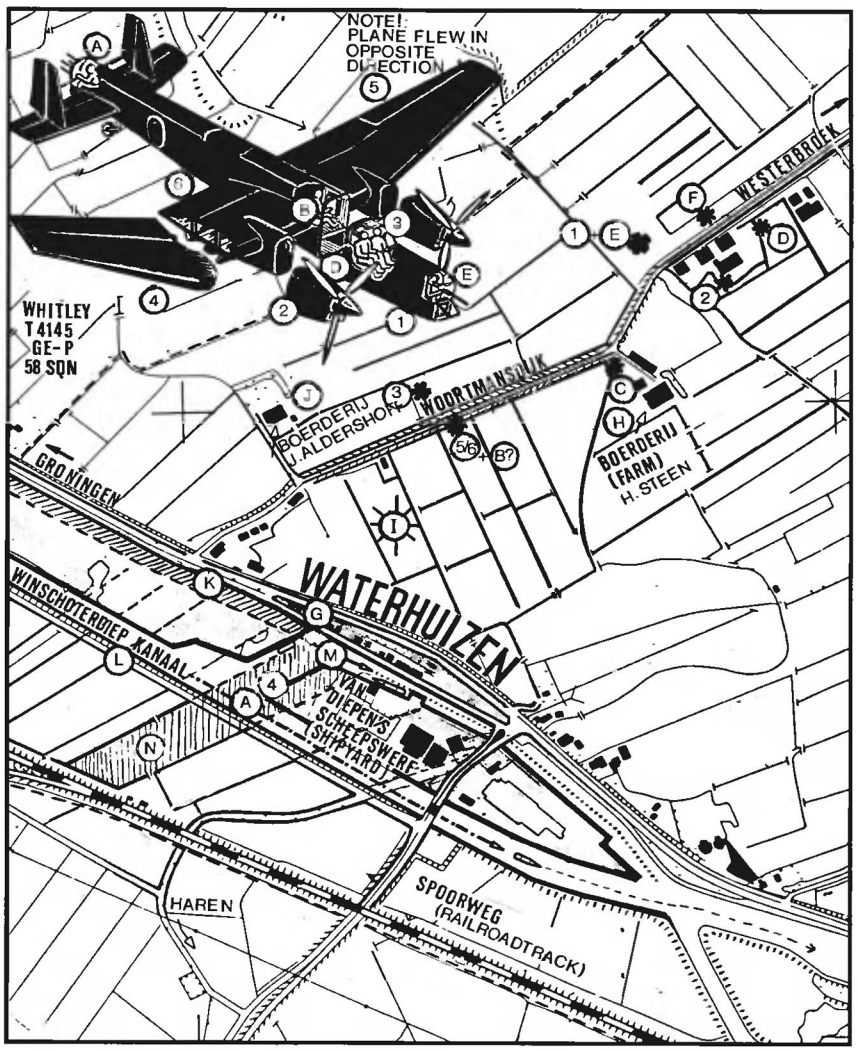
Most pieces fell on either side of Woortmans Dyke, not far from Waterhuizen and the Winschoterdiep Canal, which runs between the city of Groningen (the provincial capital) and Winschoten. The torn-off outer section of the right wing, though, fell more than a mile away from the rest of the wreckage and on the other side of the canal, which has since been realigned.

The sole survivor, Sergeant Arthur Mason, landed by parachute not far from the section of the right wing, in what was then polder, at a spot which is now probably the far bank of the realigned canal.

Mr Hendrik Steen, a son of the widow Mrs Steen, whose home Mr Aldershof referred to in his diary, thought that the airman's parachute had caught in the wing on the way down, but apparently this was not so. Nor had Mason been injured landing in a tree in the shipyard as someone told me. There were no trees where he came down.

Within earshot of where Mason landed was Mr Hendrik Wiegers, a young man whose father owned a dredging business, its dredger and barges making for wherever the work took them, which happened at that time to be on the Winschoterdiep Canal, where the vessels were moored near Van Diepen's Shipyard. Like so many folk that night, the Wiegers had heard the noise of aircraft and the firing, which had brought them out onto the deck of their houseboat to see what they could of what was happening. In the wake of the explosion, Mr Wiegers had not long spotted an object flying through the air — the wing section — when he glimpsed what he thought was a puff of white smoke drifting across the night sky above the boat — in fact, Sergeant Mason's parachute.

Suddenly, they heard shouts for help, and he and his mother left the boat and went into the polder to investigate. They came across Mason, injured and bleeding, and took him back to the boat and across a gangplank to



1 – Nose-section containing the body of the observer, Pilot Officer Cecil Frank Jones (E). 2 – Starboard (?) engine. 3 – Port (?) engine. 4 – Starboard outer wing section. 5 – Centre- section complete with port wing plus body of the wireless operator, Sergeant Arthur Clifford Wroath. 6 – Tail section. A – Tail gunner, Sergeant Arthur Ronald Mason. C – Pilot, Pilot Officer Ronald McCoy Carrapiett. D – Second pilot, Sergeant Anthony John White. F – Unexploded bomb (still unrecovered, according to local people!). G – Two small houses in background of picture showing port wing at the bottom of page 43. H – Hendrik Steen's farm. I – In this area, a watch belonging to one of the dead crewmen was discovered and returned to the family after the war. J – Jan Aldershoff's farm. K – The old Winschoterdiep Canal as it was in 1941. L – Course of the new canal. M – Dredging machines and barges of Mr Wiegers Senior were moored here on the canal, opposite the shipyard. N – Area of farmland in which Sergeant Mason and wing landed. Note that the Whitley was actually flying in the opposite direction to that depicted in our diagram.

Left: **The starboard wing outboard of the engine, having broken away from the rest of the aircraft, lies in open countryside near the Van Diepen Shipyard, over a mile away from most of the wreckage. The two houses in the background mark the position of the Winschoterdiep Canal.**

Right: **Although today the two houses remain relatively unchanged, the reconstruction of the Winschoterdiep Canal has altered its course from in front of the houses to the other side of the Van Diepen shipyard, right, obliterating the site where the wing landed. Comparison photographs by D. Sleurink.**

This 1955 view of the Van Diepen Shipyard clearly shows the reconstruction of the canal. The wing lay to the left of the small barge moored on the right. Sergeant Mason landed on a spot to the left centre of the canal T-junction.

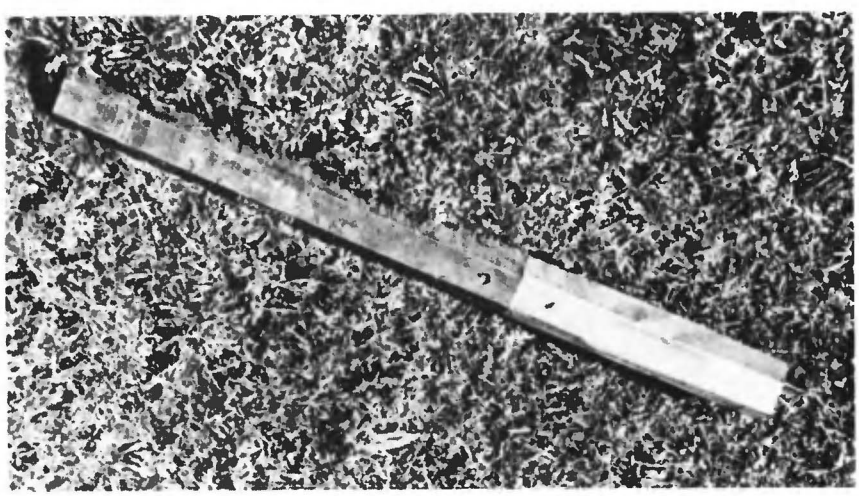
the other side of the canal, where a knot of spectators had gathered. From there he was taken to the shipyard, where he was taken in at one of the directors' homes and given a tot of brandy. It was not possible, though, to offer him a safe hiding place as well, for too many people already knew of his presence and doubtless the German authorities had been informed by local Nazi sympathisers. After a while therefore, it was decided to notify the police and hand him over to them; it was too great a risk not to, and anyway he needed medical attention. After the police took him over, Mason was driven to the Academic Hospital at Groningen. From there, after treatment and interrogation, he went to a prisoner-of-war camp for the rest of the war.

Until now, it was thought that T4145 GE-P had been encountered and shot down by Oberfeldwebel Paul Gildner during the bomber's return flight to England. This, in my view, would seem to be very much open to question; considering the number of bombs and incendiaries on board when the aircraft blew up, it is more likely that Gildner intercepted the aircraft before it reached its target. Not only were there the unexploded bombs mentioned by Mr Aldershof in his diary, but more were found in the area in the days that followed. None caused other than minor damage to property, crops and livestock, and there were no civilian casualties.

At the Steen farm the family had gone to bed early to get a good night's rest, knowing that tomorrow would be another busy day, starting before dawn. They had all slept through the noise that had made Mrs Steen wonder what was going on somewhere to the north. Mrs Steen had got up when she had first heard the throb of aircraft engines, and now, worried by the sounds of increasing activity, she roused her two sons, Jan and Hendrik. Shortly after, they heard an explosion close at hand, and they all went outside to see what was happening.

A fire was raging near the house — one of the aircraft's fuel tanks: the 'bomb' that Mr Aldershof referred to in his diary. When the Germans arrived they began shining their torches in the trees, looking for parachutes. In a nearby field they came across one of the crew, flat on his back and without a parachute. Hendrik Steen recalls that it was obviously the body of an officer, as the uniform was of a better cut and material than those worn by the others, so it was presumably that of Pilot Officer Carrapiett, the captain and 1st pilot. Upon impact, it had made a deep impression in the marshy ground.

Early next morning (the life of the farm could hardly come to a halt for a crashed aircraft), as Hendrik Steen set out for the nearby road with the milk churns, he came across another member of the crew, sitting bolt upright at the edge of a ditch, feet deep



One of the many unexploded incendiary bombs found scattered around the fields at Waterhuizen after the demise of Whitley T4145 photographed soon after the crash by an unknown German photographer.

Above: **Pilot Officer Roy Carrapiett, aged 21, the pilot of Whitley 'P-for-Peter' (via A. Jansen), and** *below:* **his grave alongside those of his crew in Esserveld Military Cemetery, near Groningen.**

This is believed to be the body of the second pilot, Sergeant Anthony White, discovered on the morning of April 8, 1941, sitting upright on the bank of the ditch, his feet buried deep in the mud. In this photograph, taken after the Germans had extricated the body, the airman's muddy flying boots can be seen in the foreground — his Irvin flying jacket lies behind.

Mrs Oomkes Senior, an eyewitness, indicates the position of the body: the faint outline of the filled-in ditch can be seen in front of her arms. Note the crane of the Van Diepen Shipyard at top right.

in the mud, just as if he were still alive. He too was not wearing a parachute. He must have struck the ground vertically, and the thought crossed Hendrik Steen's mind that anyone might have been forgiven for imagining that he had jumped from the aircraft with the intention of landing on both feet. This was possibly the body of the 2nd pilot, Sergeant Anthony White.

Later that morning, the Germans ordered Hendrik Steen and his elder brother, Jan, to lend a hand, and to bring their horse with them. A chunk of the aircraft had fallen in a field across the road opposite the farm, and the Germans wanted it turned over and broken up into smaller pieces. As the brothers got on with it, Hendrik was suddenly confronted by the sight of a man inside, a machine gun on his lap, as if he were about to shoot him. Quick as a flash, one of the Germans with them grabbed Hendrik by the shoulders and pulled him out of the line of fire! This must have been the nose section, and the body therefore was most likely that of the observer, Pilot Officer Cecil Jones.

The Germans had begun recovery operations on the 10th, according to an entry for that day in Mr Aldershof's diary. Some 43 incendiaries, he noted, had come down on his land, plus 'bombs of 45 centimetres in length and 5 centimetres in diameter'. He had taken a look inside part of the wreckage — 'the tail section', though it would seem that he may well have assumed the observer, dead behind the Vickers K gun in the aircraft's nose on the Steens' land, to have been the wireless operator — and, perhaps not surprisingly, had come away with the impression of how cramped the conditions must have been.

Perhaps as a result of what a few people thought they saw as they watched from a distance, word went round that the Germans had robbed the four dead airmen of everything they possessed — personal belongings and their clothes as well. 'In fact, that wasn't so at all', said Mr Steen. 'Those British fellows were all wearing thick, fur-lined leather flying gear, and so they wouldn't fit into the coffins. The Germans had to take them off them first. Personal belongings, from their pockets and which they had about them, had to be removed in order to identify them.'

In 1941, the Germans still accorded some respect to those killed, even though they were the enemy. Later in the war, as the scale of the Allied strategic air offensive wrought destruction upon German cities, that attitude was to change.

For some days after the incident, there was plenty going on for Mr Aldershof to jot down in his diary:

'April 12 — Huge vehicles loaded with bits of the aeroplane have left. Today they

recovered the engines and towed them towards the road. We got acquainted with two of the German guards, one 37 and the other 25 years of age, Hein and Hans, with whom we had a very pleasant evening. Hein has been in Indo-China etc. and joined the German Army of his own accord. The aircraft weighed approximately 20,000 kilos, the engines 1,000 kilos and were 1,500 horsepower each. Plenty of activity in the air. Lots of damage caused.

'April 13 — Sunday. The last fragments of the aeroplane have been taken away. After six days on guard, the Germans said farewell to us. There are still about ten other unexploded bombs on Mr De Wit's land, guarded by the police day and night. I went to Jan Oomkes' on the old dyke, where one of the bombs has exploded right in front of his house. Shrapnel went through everything, even through the barn. Easter Sunday.

'April 15 — A container with 75 incendiaries has been found on the spot where the burning aircraft was.

'April 16 — Today they exploded the bombs on De Wit's land.'

Soon the excitement surrounding the incident had begun to die down and the life of the little communities of Waterhuizen and Westerbroek to return more or less to normal. There was, however, still a police presence at the scene, and notification on April 22 that this was no longer required led to the minor commotion described in a further, final, mention of the shot-down bomber in Mr Aldershof's diary:

'. . . not until today were the police notified that it was no longer necessary for them to mount a guard. At eight o'clock a dispatch rider came hurrying from Groningen with a message informing them, but he went flat out into a ditch near us. Luckily enough, he didn't end up being killed. It took all our strength to manage to pull him out. and the police were afterwards able to return to Groningen. That accident took us an hour. And so this has been the last occurrence in relation to the shot-down Tommy. A few remains of the aircraft are still to be found over the area. We have been told that it had been hit over Germany before it blew up over here. That's why the crew were unable to get out . . . '

Mr. Aldershof, who now lives in a nearby village, still has a couple of souvenirs of the incident: an escape axe with an insulated handle, and the small ladder (minus the two top rungs) that was used for getting in and out of the underside of the aircraft.

The graves of the four members of the crew that died are to be found in Esserveld Cemetery, Groningen. A total of 6,595 British, Commonwealth and airmen of other nationalities serving with the Royal Air Force lie buried in the Netherlands, and perhaps half as many again have no known graves. National Liberation Day in the Netherlands is May 5, and each year, on the eve of the anniversary of that momentous day more than forty years ago which the efforts of the Allied air forces helped to bring about, the deaths of Allied airmen are among those commemorated at ceremonies held all over the country.

Occasionally, the remains of shot-down aircraft still come to light, especially during land reclamation, for it is believed that some six or seven hundred Allied aircraft disappeared in the Zuider Zee (now the inland waters of the IJsel) alone. Today one can still find bits of plexiglass, aluminium, even ammunition, when rooting around where the bombers — or the wreckage of them — fell from the sky.

Above: **The nose section of T4145 lies in the meadow alongside Woortmans Dyke — note the circular Vickers 'K' machine gun drums lying in front of and behind the nose section; the body of the observer, Pilot Officer Cecil Jones, was found within. The Luftwaffe men appear very preoccupied in hunting for souvenirs and the airman on the right seems to have already purloined a map from the wreckage.** *Below:* **Our author 'J.C.' searches for any overlooked relics with Mrs Wildeboer-Oomkes, who witnessed the crash aged 9.**

Jan Aldershof, whose diary records the events of April 1941, with a ladder (used by the crew to board the aircraft) *(left)* **and escape axe** *(right)* **which he removed from the wreck at the time.**

50 YEARS AGO

Left: **The Piazza Venezia — scene of so many tumultuous gatherings in the 'facisti' era. The famous balcony from which Mussolini used to speak to the masses on the Palazzo Venezia is just off to the left.** *Right:* **Night falls on Rome. Save for the flags, the building is unchanged today, although the square is a log-jam of traffic.**

After the successful incorporation of Austria into Greater Germany in April 1938, Hitler was free to concentrate on the next country with a common frontier with the Reich — Czechoslovakia. The country had been created by the break up of the Austro-Hungarian empire by the Allies in 1918 and contained widely divergent population groupings. The Sudeten area in the north-west contained 3½ million Germans, now vociferously demanding a similar union with Germany under their Nazi leader Konrad Henlein. With Hitler's overt support, Henlein was busy creating unrest which was intended to give an excuse for Germany to step in to protect its nationals. Nevertheless Hitler could not be sure that Britain, France, or even the Soviet Union, might not at last decide to make a firm stand so he needed the reassurance of the support of his ally — albeit morally if not practically — for his Czech venture. A trip to Italy was therefore arranged for the beginning of May.

Hitler's visit was no small affair. A five-train, 500-strong party arrived at the beflagged station at the top of the Brenner Pass on May 2 before proceeding down the Alps and into Italy. It was dark by the time the Führer's train arrived in Rome where he was greeted by King Victor Emmanuel. Official receptions, conferences, troop reviews, visits to the theatre and a trip out with the Italian Navy were all squeezed into the hectic five-day visit which culminated in a banquet at the Palazzo Venezia on May 7. Germany's Foreign Minister had presented Mussolini's son-in-law, Count Ciano, with a draft treaty for an alliance but, more important to Hitler, the Duce signified he would not have any objection to German interference in Czechoslovakia.

The visit that month was the result of a long-standing invitation from Mussolini in return for the Duce's own trip to Germany the previous September. Then Hitler had gone out of his way to impress his guest with the military might of Nazi Germany in parades and ceremonial; now it was Mussolini's turn to try to outdo the Führer. Here the two dictators stand on the steps of the Vittorio Emanuele II monument, erected to commemorate the unification of Italy earlier this century and, since the end of WWI, the location of Italy's Unknown Soldier.

AFTER THE BATTLE

WRECK RECOVERY

THE EXHUMATION OF A HUMBER

Over the past fifteen years we have reported on a number of recoveries of armoured fighting vehicles; some from actual battlefields and others from training grounds or old ranges. With the widespread interest in AFV preservation, virtually all those known vehicles or tanks in Western Europe lying 'in the raw' have now been appropriated by private collectors or public museums and it appears that it is now only those beneath the ground that await claim. Such a recovery was brought to our attention recently by Michael Bell of the Miniature Armoured Fighting Vehicle Association. Mike writes as follows:

'During 1986 Dave Heaton bought a farmhouse at Longridge, near Preston, Lancashire together with the surrounding land. One day he was in his front garden, when a passing farmer, George Gosling, noticed a Dodge Weapons Carrier in the yard. Mr Gosling stopped to ask him if he was interested in military vehicles. A conversation between the two commenced with Dave explaining that, up until then at least, his main hobby had lain with old fire engines, but that his brother, Alan, was very interested. So Mr Gosling then told a story of how he had buried a Humber Scout Car in the field on the land Dave had purchased 25 years before.

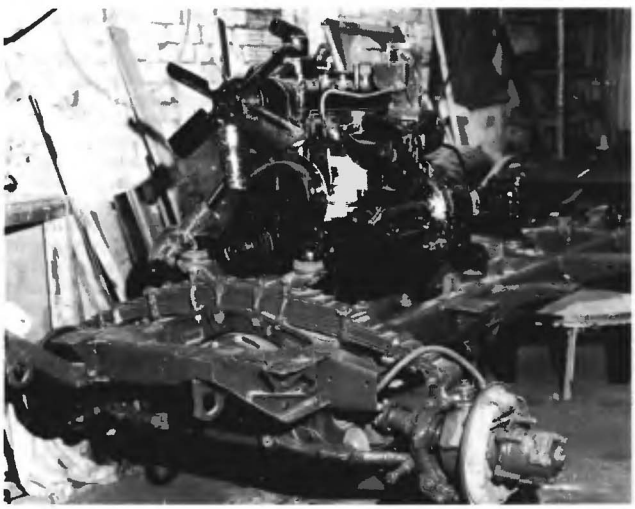
'The thought of recovering the buried vehicle on his own patch appealed very much, and one of Dave's first moves was to seek my help for a photograph of this type of vehicle. I found one in my collection that seemed particularly interesting for him to view. Then, along with the aid of his brother Alan, he gathered a group of us together on June 11, 1987 to help him recover the armoured car. A digger had been hired to help with the task but, to everyones disappointment, it kept breaking down. It took all night to dig a hole 9ft×12ft, where the Humber was supposed to be buried but at the end there was no sign of it. The farmer came along to see how we were doing, I showed him the photograph of the Humber, at which he looked puzzled and remarked, "That is not the type of vehicle that I buried". He explained that the car had had a

long bonnet on it, unlike the one in my photograph. In my camera bag I carried a book on British armoured vehicles from which I found him a picture of a Humber Mark III Light Reconnaissance car that fronted a long bonnet and he agreed that this was the type of vehicle that he had buried. The whole group of volunteers worked extremely hard that night, but found no sign of the car and efforts had to be abandoned until the following week.

'For the second dig, another JCB was hired, and when our group arrived to commence work the machine was already steadily making the same hole bigger and wider, but alas there was still no sign of the car. All our efforts increasing the excavation were fruitless and yet again the operation had to be abandoned.

'At the third attempt our luck changed when some of the banking near where we were digging gave way and out poked the chassis end of the Humber. At last we had found it. It seemed we had been digging near the car but not quite in the right direction. Again it was getting late so we left the final exhumation of the buried vehicle until the next day.

'While completing the recovery of the Humber, we discovered to our horror that Mr Gosling had gone mad and cut three-quarters of the armoured body away to make it into a flat back vehicle. But, looking into the hole where the car still lay, all the hard work still felt well worthwhile. The rear of the chassis seemed in good condition, as did the front armoured body and axle although the centre part was badly corroded and the rear axle was missing. When the lifting began the car sadly broke in two, but neither Dave nor Alan were in any way distressed by this mishap. They both intend to rebuild the car and I think the rest of our recovery group will all be willing to lend a helping hand.'



Dave and Alan Heaton are carrying out restoration, with some parts supplied by the Motor Vehicle Trust. All photos M. J. Bell.

AFTER THE BATTLE

RETURN TO THE BERGHOF

READER'S INVESTIGATIONS

BY JIM R. OSBORNE

As American forces approached the town of Berchtesgaden, on the edge of the Bavarian Alps, on May 4, 1945 — units of the 101st Airborne Division from the direction of Munich and of the 3rd Division from the direction of Salzberg — they were soon to converge upon what in effect had been the second capital of Germany since 1933 when Adolf Hitler assumed the rôle of Führer. For it was here that Hitler chose to build his private residence on the beautiful mountain range known as the Obersalzberg just above Berchtesgaden *(see After the Battle No. 9)*. It was built on the site of an earlier house he had rented in 1928 and which was ultimately purchased by him five months after he came to power in 1933. Immediately Hitler began to alter and build on the original house, and subsequent reconstruction and enlargement transformed the property into the home he wanted for himself, appropriately renamed 'Berghof' (Mountain House). The Berghof had an extensive kitchen complex as well as guest and servants wings. It incorporated large Gothic staircases, a huge reception hall, marble pillars and fireplaces, and a gigantic picture window in the main room which could be wound down to allow open-air viewing of the Alpine scenery below during the summer months. Alongside was the garage, its roof forming the terrace where so many of the well-known photographs of Hitler and his frequent visitors were taken.

Shortly after purchasing the property in 1933 Hitler began to acquire all the surrounding land. His personal and Party secretary, Rudolph Hess, and Hess's assistant, SS General Martin Bormann, between them conducted negotiations that it is thought resulted in up to four hundred farmers and property owners being moved out. Buildings were taken over by the regime and an SS barracks was built out of sight behind the Berghof as the vicinity became virtually the Führer's personal domain, more and more of the fate of Europe and the Western World being decided on these otherwise tranquil slopes, with Hitler finding solace at his mountain retreat from the problems which increased daily during his stays in Berlin.

Bormann had acquired a property which he converted into a spacious mountain house just two hundred yards from the Berghof on the next hillside. Above Bormann's house, about two hundred and fifty yards away, stood the house that Luftwaffe Chief Hermann Göring had owned since before 1933, enlarged in 1941. Albert Speer had a house and studio a mile or so away. A special four-storey guest house for such dignitaries as Mussolini and others was built a quarter of a mile behind the Berghof, not far from the local pension which underwent a massive facelift. All of these locations (except Speer's) were linked with an elaborate

Top: **The Berghof undergoing enlargement and the terrace over the garage.**

Left: **Understandably, Hitler's private residence had a magnetic attraction to souvenir hunters. GIs of the Third Infantry Division managed to reap the lion's share but within weeks every possible fixture and fitting had been removed by the thousands of servicemen who scoured the area for a personal memento.** *Right:* **By 1952, when the US military authorities opened the Obersalzberg to the general public, the Berghof was a sorry sight and what remained was demolished later that year.**

tunnel complex which channelled for miles throughout the Obersalzberg mountain ridge. The underground works included accommodation and headquarters — never to be used for the last stand conducted from a 'National Redoubt' to which the Allies feared that the leading Nazis planned to withdraw in the closing stages of the war.

The Berghof experienced its first taste of destruction on April 25, 1945, when Royal Air Force bombers pounded the mountainside with a concentrated bombardment. Damage to buildings in the area included the house's guest wing. In Berlin, in the early hours of the 29th, Hitler married the woman who had lived there mostly in his absence, Eva Braun, and a day later he and his former mistress withdrew to their quarters in the bunker beneath the Chancellery to commit suicide. Just hours before American forces reached the Berghof the remaining SS troops in the area attempted to set fire to it before it fell into the hands of the Allied forces. The fire caused extensive damage, but the building still stood. Word of the capture of Hitler's house spread fast among the victorious Allied forces and it became a star attraction for those eager to satisfy their curiosity, who descended (in this case, ascended) in droves. It was during this time that GIs acquired countless artefacts from the Berghof which had survived the bombing and the fire. These included great stores of table linen, napkins and suchlike which were to be found in the kitchen and servant wings, plus hundreds, perhaps thousands, of pieces of silverware, platters, tea service sets and other tableware such as china, cups and saucers, almost all bearing Hitler's monogram and insignia of the eagle and swastika. Part of the abundant source of more personal belongings included, of course, books — the Hoffman souvenir photo albums of the Berghof, for instance — and items of clothing and family pictures, etc. Many of these items found their way back to the States after the war and have surfaced in museums and outstanding collections; others have never been seen again. One GI of the 3rd Division wrapped an elaborate mantel clock in a breakfast tablecloth but after carrying it for two miles reluctantly pitched it into a gulley beside the road as being too heavy and too difficult to carry back to his unit. Could it still be there?

The war over, the Obersalzberg was off limits for German nationals because of its Nazi associations while very much open for the enjoyment of the occupation forces — in particular the Americans, who set up rest and recreation facilities. The sightseers numbered Generals Eisenhower and Mark Clark, a succession of American Senators and Congressmen, even the Queen of the Belgians: the high and the low, intrigued by both the beauty of the area and the vestiges of the Nazi hierarchy it contained, which they wanted to see for themselves.

The blackened walls remained standing from 1945 until April 30, 1952, when by order of the Bavarian Government high-explosive charges were placed throughout the ruins and detonated, levelling the skeleton of what had been Hitler's home from 1933 to 1945. Long before then, virtually everything of value or use which could be removed or stripped from the Berghof had been taken, not just by souvenir hunters, but by local Germans, who put wiring, plumbing, roofing, wood and other scarce items to practical use. Just a few months before the demolition, Hollywood had used it as the location for a final scene in a movie starring Gene Kelly, ***The Devil Makes Three***, a light post-war adventure film concerning neo-Nazi involvement in Germany and Austria following WWII. In that movie some of the last scenes of the Berghof both inside and out appear, and one can see at first hand what the place looked like by that time.

Even after the site was cleared, the garage was left although it was just a shell. Probably the last worthwhile relic — the massive door lock — was liberated by the Editor in 1975. It was therefore with great interest that we heard from Judge Jim R. Osborne, one of our faithful American readers, that he with some friends had found a way beyond the garage into a further set of underground rooms. Here Jim stands by the old garage doorway — the grassed area behind once being the terrace.

After the ruins were blown up, the German Forestry Service seeded the hillside and within a few years the pile of rubble was no longer visible from the lower roadway approaching the Obersalzberg. Only the garage, built into the hillside, with its thick stone walls and three distinctive windows, was still to be seen. By climbing in through the windows one can look around inside, as I did on my first trip to the Berghof in 1981, like many others before and since. With a little imagination one can visualize Hitlers' limousine or others pulling into the garage through the single garage door opening, blocked by a great mound of blasted concrete, brick and rubble from the Berghof. Here and there, the odd piece of brick or chunk of concrete protruded from the undergrowth, and I found that the brushwood was almost too dense to find even that without looking really hard, and it required some prior knowledge of what the building had looked like. A large, thick cement-poured retaining wall which separated the Berghof from the slopes of the hillside behind had not been destroyed — but I would think that, like others, I was not alone in assuming that the garage was the only part of the Berghof left standing.

It was not until my second visit, in 1986, that I began to realize other parts of the Berghof might still exist below ground. It was while inspecting the interior of the garage with other WWII history enthusiasts that we noticed in the left-hand corner a small opening in one of the thick poured-cement walls, about five feet above the floor, which appeared to be an outlet for water or vent pipes — a length of them still there. It looked about twelve inches wide by twenty inches tall. Reaching into it, we could see that the wall was about twenty inches thick. Looking into it, nothing could be seen of course except total darkness without the benefit of a flashlight. Since I had no flashlight with me in 1986 I had only one choice and that was to stick my arm into the opening with my flash camera and snap a photograph which I could develop after I returned to the States. I did so twice and on development of the film some weeks later was amazed at the results. It was obvious that more of the Berghof existed below ground than many had thought previously. The photos showed at least two rooms — a doorway extending from the first into the second — with brick, stucco and other burnt and charred ruins lying all over the floor;

Following the initial discovery of the intriguing hole in the garage wall in 1986, Jim, who is also Chairman of the Indiana Military Museum at Vincennes, returned once again from the States to carry out further investigations with the aid of friends in June 1987. This is the two-foot-thick opening from which he and the others had just entered from the garage.

there were empty fittings on the walls and the marks of where pipes and conduits had run, removed presumably when the rooms were accessible from above. Needless to say, curiosity about what lay beyond what was visible in the photograph began to mount in anticipation of returning to the Berghof to find out as my 1987 trip to Europe drew near.

We returned to Berchtesgaden on June 28, 1987, and registered for two nights at our favourite mountain lodge on the outskirts of town. On the first evening, after an early dinner, the four of us on the trip called for a taxi which delivered us to the Hotel Türken (taken over in 1933 and used by the RSD), just a hundred yards behind the site of the Berghof. Two of the others on the trip, Neil Thomas and Tom Hare, were WWII buffs. The fourth, former resident of my home town Pat McAllister, was enlisted in the project that evening. Tom had been with me in 1981 when we spotted the opening in the garage wall which aroused our curiosity and had stimulated our plans for returning to explore further.

We had brought some essential items with us including a good supply of flashlights, military canvas packs and certain small tools in case they were needed. We walked down the curved road from the Hotel Türken and ducked into the woods near the old driveway leading to the Berghof, now closed off with rubble and overgrown with trees and other brush. Following the outline of where the driveway used to be, we arrived at where the picture window would have loomed above us, the blocked-up entrance of the garage immediately ahead. We went a few feet down the slope and along the side of the garage, entered it by climbing through the centre window, and preceded immediately to the left-hand corner of the interior and the opening to whatever lay beyond. We gathered several bricks and concrete segments from the rubble blocking the door and strewn about the floor and stacked them to enable us to reach the opening. Neil Thomas, the shortest and thinnest of the bunch, volunteered to go through first. We took hold of his legs and lifted him up and in, and he squeezed through sideways, arms outstretched. Grabbing hold of a pipe at the top of the opening, he was able to haul himself in until his legs were clear on the other side and then drop to the floor five or six feet below. He quickly shone his flashlight around the room he had entered and began to call out a running commentary to the three of us on the other side. He walked into three more rooms, continuing the commentary. At that point I yelled that I was coming through. The other two helped me this time, lifting my legs as I pulled myself in and dropped down as Neil had just done. They then followed, joining us inside a part of the Berghof probably few if any have seen since the demolition charges were laid in 1952.

We discovered a total of six rooms, varying in size, plus a passageway stretching the entire length of the back of the garage area and then abruptly heading northward towards the back of the Berghof for some forty feet before being blocked off by rubble. The rooms we initially entered were those directly under the great hall or the room with the picture window so famous in all Berghof pictures. The furthest point we reached was a small entry way at the top of some steps, this containing the one feature discernible to us from our previous study and photos of the Berghof — the arched doorway at the foot of the steps to the main entrance. The doorway was totally blocked by rubble that had obviously crashed down when the ruins were demolished. A patch of white-painted stucco still adhered to the ceiling in the entry way, and other traces were to be found in the rooms. The ceilings were damp and wet, as was most of the floor area. Miniature stalactites were forming where moisture and water had found its way through from the ground cover and debris above, and our feet trod on a sodden layer of dirt and rubble which also lay about in heaps.

There was certainly no lack of evidence of the way in which the place had been scavenged and stripped of usable materials after the war. That foretokened by the photographs taken through the opening the previous year — the empty clamps and brackets, the outlines and indentations on wall surfaces where pipes and electrical conduits once ran — was to be seen almost everywhere one looked. Although there were objects such as the rusting clamps and base plates of light fixtures and wall attachments which were retrievable, and in one room next to the entrance way a commode lay shattered in the rubble underfoot, the sole artefact of any significance that we could find was a drain cover: a ten-inch square, white,

Tom Hare, Neil Thomas and Jim Osborne inspecting the fittings which remain. All pipes and conduits had been removed.

Much of the original white stucco still remained on the walls.

The scene beyond. Neil Thomas in a room which they discovered led to a pile of rubble and an arched doorway . . .

porcelain-coated drain in the centre of the floor directly beneath the great hall. It was easily procured, by inserting ones fingers through the grating and lifting it out, and it cleaned up nicely.

In all, our visit lasted just about an hour before the batteries in our flashlights began to dim and discretion overruled our desire to continue to search and ponder. We felt an eerie sense of knowing that few if any of these rooms had been entered for some thirty-five years, and of knowing whose basement this had been and what had gone on up above. As we scrambled one by one back out of the opening, a feeling of excitement and accomplishment came over us at having been in there, and in the realisation that once our exploration became known perhaps it would not be very long before measures were taken to prevent others following in our footsteps. If that should happen, we can always reflect on the occasion and consider ourselves to have been another four to add to that long line of curiosity seekers to have come to this place since the end of the war. Then, those countless GIs could rightly think of a visit here as part of their triumph over the evil they had fought to destroy. In some small way therefore, our own visit enabled us to try to understand and appreciate the sort of feelings our uncles and fathers might have experienced when they were able to rove through the ruins of Hitler's home, after its owner had been consigned to another, less idyllic, place.

. . . the same one partly hidden by the sheet metal directly to the right of these GIs.

Vital evidence in the Case of the Judge and the Disappearing Drain Cover. As the final souvenir, Jim had to settle for an object which probably once runneth over with the bathwaters of the Third Reich.